



## U.S. Jewish women's advocacy group closes, but its mission lives on

Thanks to Advancing Women Professionals, Jewish organizations are somewhat friendlier to female executives, but sexism is still entrenched in the establishment.

By Debra Nussbaum Cohen | Nov. 6, 2015



Sheila Katz is sure that she would not be working in the Jewish community were it not for Shifra Bronznick.

Katz, an employee at the University of North Carolina Hillel, the Jewish campus organization, was struggling to negotiate a raise while dealing with sexist attitudes from board members. She got in touch with Bronznick, who founded and runs Advancing Women Professionals and the Jewish Community, a New York-based national organization dedicated both to helping women move ahead in their careers and to changing policies and attitudes at Jewish organizations.

Bronznick coached Katz on negotiating the raise and dealing with the board. It worked. Katz stayed at UNC, and later moved to Hillel's Washington, D.C. headquarters to work on its national staff.

She also joined AWP's Op-Ed Project, which taught her not only how to write an opinion piece, but also that her opinions mattered. That confidence has led her to high-profile speaking gigs at AIPAC and J Street conferences, among others. And it

made her feel comfortable enough bringing up the need to improve Hillel's family leave policy at her first meeting with newly appointed CEO Eric Fingerhut in 2013.

Last year, at 31, Katz became the youngest person ever to become a vice president at Hillel International, and was named one of five American women to watch in 2015 by Craigslist's Craig Newmark.



Without AWP, says Katz, "I would have left a long time ago, frustrated that there was no upward mobility for me."

Though Bronznick and AWP have impacted hundreds of women working in the Jewish world in a similar way, the organization is now preparing to shut its doors. But don't call the steps she's taken to wind down — which included a final national conference in New York on October 27th — an exit strategy. Instead, Bronznick, with her unique style and in a thick New York accent, is calling it "an exist strategy," focused on putting the impetus to move the work forward in the hands of those who have learned from AWP.

"We've helped people both advance and create change," said Bronznick, 61, who as a 4th grader told classmates she would be the country's first female president.

AWP is notable for teaching change not from the top down, but by coming in through the middle. "We felt that we had to ignite the commitment of people throughout the system, people at every level, to make change," Bronznick told Haaretz. "Women were almost invisible as leaders, but we saw their potential, equipping them to act on it and make change for themselves and others."

"AWP has always framed its work as an intervention rather than an institution. It doesn't get them lost in institution building, which is the downfall of many good ideas in the Jewish community," said Yehuda Kurtzer, president of the Shalom

Hartman Institute of North America, which is partnering with AWP to develop a curriculum focused on gender and Jewish leadership. “They’ve had a laser focus. They’ve had a few different projects where they can show significant cultural change.”

### **Springing into Action**



When Bronznick started AWP in 2001, with backing from philanthropist Barbara Dobkin, few Jewish non-profits could be called family-friendly. Women were leaving in droves, if they were hired for mid- or upper-management level jobs at all. “The Jewish community was complacent about the gender gap in leadership,” wrote Bronznick in a document outlining AWP’s evolution. “Women faced huge barriers on the leadership trajectory.”

Bronznick and others started by comparing the number of male and female CEOs, senior executives and lay leaders working in the organized Jewish community. They collected work-life policies from Jewish non-profits and explored their formal and informal approaches to leadership development and executive search. They surveyed hundreds of men and women about their experiences. They found not just a wide gender gap, but that bias-laden myths had become deeply embedded in Jewish organizational culture.

Data in hand, AWP collaborated with organizational leaders. They experimented with pilot programs at the Jewish Federations of North America on a gender equity initiative, and with the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism to create a more equitable search process for female rabbis, who were not getting hired when their male colleagues were.

In 2008, AWP and Cambridge Leadership Associates, a consulting firm, published a guidebook of techniques and strategies called “Leveling the Playing Field”, which

tailored adaptive leadership theory to the particulars of the organized Jewish community.

The same year, AWP brought together 120 leaders for a “Conference for Change.” Following that, AWP launched its three ongoing projects: Men as Allies, in which men pledge not to participate in male-only panel discussions; Action Learning Teams, which bring together small groups of women executives to train, network, strategize and support each other; and the Better Work, Better Life campaign, which advocates for longer paid family leave on the birth or adoption of a child. The campaign recently enlisted the 104th Jewish organization to commit.

The Action Learning Teams have created a “new girls’ network” to parallel the “old boys’ network,” as well as trained their participants how to address professional challenges. Their agenda is two-fold: to help participants advance their own careers and at the same time lead to broader change.

Had Ronit Sherwin not participated, she knows she wouldn’t be running an intermediate-size Jewish federation in San Antonio, Texas. Previously executive director of the University of Delaware Hillel, Sherwin has worked with AWP for a decade. In her 40s, Sherwin was single for most of her 6-year-old twins’ lives and married last year. “There are a lot more women executives and CEOs in the federation system” now than there were in the past, Sherwin told Haaretz. But “there are not that many who have young children. The few others who do have husbands who are full-time stay-at-home fathers, and I don’t have that.”

As a female CEO at a Southern Jewish federation, a job she began in 2014, Sherwin continues to face uphill battles. “I find the gender thing in my board, and with other agency executives in my own community,” she said. The morning she spoke with Haaretz, Sherwin met with the other Jewish organization directors based in the same building as the Jewish federation. “I’m the only woman and the only person under 60-something. At first they thought they were getting this nice, sweet younger woman who would go along with their ideas,” Sherwin said. “I am actually very nice and sweet, but I have my own ideas and am not going to be bullied around. That’s been a little surprising” for her San Antonio colleagues.

## **Not Just Women**

Jacob Feinspan is also spreading AWP’s philosophy far and wide.

As executive director of Jews United for Justice, a community organizing agency in Washington D.C. and Baltimore, he implemented 12 weeks of paid family leave and formal flexible scheduling, which allows the organization’s 11 employees to work part time from home. Feinspan’s agency has now initiated a city-wide universal paid family leave effort. If it passes, it will provide 16 weeks of paid parental leave to anyone who lives or works in the District of Columbia.

A decade ago California passed a law that provides six weeks of paid parental leave, Feinspan, 35, told Haaretz. He believes it has a good chance of becoming law in Washington as well. “By winning in D.C. not only will we improve the lives of more



than half a million workers, but we'll also change the terms of what's possible in our country," he said. Even for a small organization, providing paid family leave is fiscally prudent, countering the argument that it's too expensive for a non-profit to offer. "It's actually a lot more expensive to try to find a really good staff person than keep the really good staff person you found and invested in," he said.

Despite experience like Feinspan's, there is significant resistance to making gender equity a reality in Jewish organizations. Much work still has to be done, say those involved. "We equipped a network of leaders who took action but deep action takes a really long time," Bronznick told Haaretz.

## **Breaking with Tradition**

Some of the most serious obstacles remain in the traditional Jewish establishment organizations.

The Jewish community "wastes talent and encourages people to leave," says outgoing American Jewish World Service President Ruth Messinger. "Men are hired for their potential, women hired for their experience only." She recounted a recent experience: "Two federations were searching for a new CEO. They said 'We really can't look at women to be CEO in our federation because it's not the right job for a woman.' The bias was unbelievable."

"In the legacy world we have not created the robust network of women leaders that we have in the social justice world, innovation sector, in foundations and spiritual communities," Bronznick told Haaretz. "We may have had breakthroughs and changes in workplace policies and have cracked a glass ceiling, but we haven't yet removed it or broken the gender gap in pay."

Barbara Dobkin, 71, AWP's primary funder, invested \$6 million in the organization. Going forward, "the work is going to have to be monitored," she said. "People don't want to see slippage." Who will do it? "I don't know who's going to hold feet to the fire," said Dobkin. "I hope people don't drop it."

Bronznick expects that those who have learned from her and AWP will continue the organization's work. "We believe there will be annual, regular convenings of the network of change-makers who think gender equity, shared leadership and good workplace practices are essential," she told Haaretz. Hillel's Katz is paying forward what she's learned. She brought a younger female Hillel colleague to AWP's final national conference. She is also planning to offer negotiation training for Hillel-connected college seniors so that women don't start out with a pay gap in their first jobs out of school.

After AWP formally closes at the end of the year, Bronznick, who plans to write a book and do more of what she calls action research, will have the institutional support of Auburn Theological Seminary, a multi-faith leadership development institute in upper Manhattan.