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SMARTER PERSPECTIVE: FAITH-BASED REAL ESTATE

L'Dor V'Dor - From Generation to Generation: What We Owe the Jewish Future by Acting Honestly on Our Real Estate Today

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For forty-four years, I stood on the bimah at Anshe Emet Synagogue in Chicago and watched a moment repeat itself hundreds of times: a parent lifting a Torah scroll from the ark and placing it into the arms of their son or daughter. It is a moment of physical transfer — the weight of the scroll passing from one set of hands to another — but everyone in the room understands it is not really about the scroll. It is l'dor v'dor: from generation to generation. In that instant, a young person's years of study meet their parents' commitment to Jewish education, inside a community that the synagogue — and the building that houses it — made possible. Jewish past, present, and future, together in one room.

I have carried that image with me as I've moved from the pulpit into work advising Jewish institutions on their real estate. Because the harder question behind it — what happens when we are not true to those words — turns out to be as much about buildings as it is about Torah scrolls.

I want to make an argument that may be uncomfortable. Holding on to Jewish institutional real estate that has no viable future — and failing to pursue consolidation when consolidation is clearly the right path — is not an act of fidelity to the generations that built our institutions. It is a failure of responsibility to the generations who come after us.

> L'Dor V'Dor does not mean passing on the building. It means passing on the community the building was built to sustain. Sometimes those are the same thing. Sometimes — and this is the harder truth — they are not.

The Stewardship We Inherited

The men and women who built the synagogues, JCCs, day schools, and federation campuses were not building monuments to themselves. They were investing in Jewish continuity — sacrificing, fundraising, arguing over blueprints and mortgage terms because they believed their community deserved a physical home equal to its ambitions. That is what we inherited.

But inheritance is not custody. To inherit something is to receive it with the responsibility to use it wisely — not to preserve it unchanged regardless of circumstance, but to deploy it toward the purpose it was built for. A generation that simply maintains a building, at great cost, while the community it was meant to serve contracts around it, is not honoring its inheritance. It is consuming it.

The Cost of Holding On

Every year an institution maintains a building it cannot afford, in service of a community that has outgrown or moved away from it, is a year of resources diverted from Jewish education, social services, rabbinical salaries, and security — into deferred maintenance, heating, insurance, and debt service instead. That cost shows up as programming that never happens, teachers who are never hired, tuition assistance never offered, security upgrades delayed.

It compounds. Institutions that carry unsustainable real estate for too long often find that when they finally act — forced by crisis rather than choice — their options are far worse than they once were. A property that could have sold in an orderly process at fair value becomes a distressed asset sold under bank pressure. A campus that could have anchored a thoughtful

> The greatest gift we can give the next generation of Jewish communal life is not the buildings we built. It is the financial wisdom to ensure the institutions those buildings were meant to house can continue to flourish — in whatever form that requires.

consolidation becomes the subject of emergency negotiations. An endowment that could have been built from sale proceeds is instead drained to cover deficits. What one generation fails to do strategically, the next inherits as a crisis.

The Obligation to Consolidate

This failure is especially acute around consolidation. Communities that maintain multiple underutilized campuses — a synagogue here, a JCC there, a federation building across town, each below capacity, each carrying its own fixed costs — are not preserving Jewish communal life. They are dispersing the resources it requires across a portfolio of buildings that no longer serve the community at the scale they were designed for.

Consolidation is not a concession; it is a strategy. The communities that have consolidated successfully — bringing multiple institutions onto a shared campus, disposing of excess property thoughtfully, directing proceeds toward endowment and programming — are today the communities with the strongest finances, the deepest institutional collaboration, and the most vibrant Jewish life. They made hard decisions, had difficult conversations,and asked their communities to let go of buildings that held real memories. In return, they gave the next generation something more valuable than a building: a financially sustainable Jewish community with the resources to pursue its mission.

L'Dor V'Dor: The Harder Meaning

The Talmud teaches that each generation is obligated not merely to transmit what it received, but to add to it — to leave the tradition richer and more capable of sustaining those who come after. Applied to Jewish institutional real estate, the implication is clear: our obligation is not to preserve every building the generations before us built. It is to ensure the resources embedded in those buildings — the land, the equity, the philanthropic capital that built them — are deployed toward a Jewish future that is financially sustainable, programmatically vital, and worthy of the investment that made it possible.

That is hard work. It requires honesty about the gap between what our institutions were built for and what they can actually sustain today. It requires the courage to make decisions that will be resisted by those who love these buildings— and they should be loved — and the wisdom to help them see that the deepest form of that love is ensuring the community the building was built to serve continues to thrive.

I think often of that Torah passing from parent to child. The scroll matters because of what it carries, not because of the parchment itself. Our buildings are the same. L'dor v'dor. From generation to generation. Not the buildings — the people. Not the walls — the community that gathers within them. That is what we are called to transmit. There has never been a more urgent moment to act on that calling.



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