

VT-984 Transcription

Friedman, Herbert A. "Priorities in Leadership: Ben-Gurion's
Decision to Sink Altalena." Wexner Heritage Foundation Winter
Retreat. [Houston, Tex.]. 9 February 1990.

Herbert A. Friedman: [00:10] These two guys are something, aren't they? Yeah, it's their generation, David Harris and Nathan [Laufer?]. And it's your generation. And when I tell the old stories about what happened a long time ago, and they're fascinating stories, and it doesn't matter whether it's about stealing airplanes or what it's about, I see the look in your eyes. And you say to yourself, "By God, those days and opportunities will never repeat themselves, and we will never have the chance in our lifetime to move history the way you did." And I say to you [1:00], "Your moment is here."

Now, 200 communities can sit in Miami on February the 6th and fumble around, and not know what the hell to do, and I think that was the net result of the whole meeting. That's the question you asked me. They seem to be dealing in an old-fashioned way with conventional ideas, and nothing new, and nothing sparkling, and that's failure.

You will either seize this moment or you won't. You will live or die with honor or condemnation. The choice is yours. And if there can be no solutions found on the national level, then you find them on the local level, and I'll spell out to you exactly what I mean [2:00].

There are three challenges functioning, working parallel and simultaneously, and Dr. Connor's question about whether one recommendation seems to invalidate the other is not to be feared. All three have to be done simultaneously. There are Jews coming into the United States, and they have to be absorbed here. There are Jews coming into Israel, and they have to be absorbed there. And there are Jews who will remain in the Soviet Union, and we have to create an infrastructure for them there. And that may be wasted money in some people's eyes, and I don't think any money spent invested in creating a sense of Jewish identity is ever wasted, even if it takes you 100 years to reap the fruits, because 100 years is nothing in terms of Jewish history. Sub specie aeternitatis, what's 100 years [3:00]?

Look at how long it took, thirty, forty years, to wake up the spirit of Jewish survivalism and desire to live from the little tiny spark. I remember a man in Israel by the name of Shaul Avigur, Moshe Sharett's brother-in-law, who in the 1930s, and then later in the forties, took on the assignment of trying

to increase the little tiny flame up in the labor camp in Vorkuta up near the Arctic Circle. And how did he do it? From an underground operation in Palestine before it was even Israel, he was sending handwritten copies of a lu'ach, a calendar, as big as a book of matches -- no bigger -- that could be hidden in your pocket. And if he could put a calendar in the hands of a Jew who was a slave laborer up in that camp in Vorkuta [4:00], he would keep in live in that man's mind when was Yom Kippur, and when was Sukkot, and revive the ancient memories from before 1917, which were beginning to lie dormant because they were unused. And he was relighting the fire to use Jewish knowledge and memory, and memory is what keeps you alive when the times are hard and frozen.

So it doesn't matter if you don't get the fruits for forty or fifty or sixty years. No investment is wasted. Now, these three things are going on simultaneously with a rapidity which has startled everyone, and everybody is confounded. There should by now -- and I will get to the answer to your question immediately, the nitty-gritty of the whole business. If I were asked, and I was asked, to [5:00] provide some ideas, which I did -- I wrote them down and gave them to the proper authorities -- as to what I would do, I would begin with the following.

I would establish a line of credit, somewhere between \$2 and \$5 billion, with a group of banks and insurance companies, to be drawn down as we needed it. Pay a small amount of money for a letter of credit; it's worth it. Along comes a situation in which somebody estimates that there will be 100,000 Jews going into Israel in 1990, and 30,000, 40,000 Jews coming into the United States in 1990. And somebody else estimates that it will take \$420 million, or somebody else says no, it's \$600 million. It doesn't matter. It's all guesswork.

What you do know [6:00] is you need cash, and you need it fast, and you need it so that nobody is put at a disadvantage. I think the American Jewish community already has made one failure. It should have said to Israel by now, "Whatever the cost is of taking into Israel any and every Soviet Jew will be borne completely by the diaspora. You folks forget about it. You've got enough problems on your hands. You've got the social problems, you've got the psychological adjustment problems, you have the hatred and the fear of the newcomer on the part of the old-timer, who himself isn't settled yet." You think the Moroccan Jew who came thirty years ago is settled yet? Full of his own fears and insecurity, still. Don't load on him the kind of tax burden that this will represent. I think it's bad

haggling. It's [7:00] cheap. It's the Shuk that I never thought I would see operating between Jews.

For Mr. Dinitz to come running around, threatening that he'll go run a separate campaign in America, or for Mr. Peres to have to stand up in the Knesset in Israel and say that the Jews in the rest of the world are not carrying their share, why should those men have to be provoked into saying things like that, which are ugly and which are not soft? American Jewry, English Jewry, et cetera, et cetera, says to Israel Jewry, "Okay, it's our problem money-wise. It's your problem to put another goat in the tent, more people in the houses. Crowd up closer, rub shoulders. Make the closeness even worse."

We didn't do it. Okay [8:00]. We're quibbling and we're arguing and we're fumbling. That's the bad word. We're fumbling about how to raise the \$420 million over three years. All the pledges we want now so we're sure the 420 will come in, but you have three years to pay. This is the concept, as though to seduce you, as though you need something to seduce you to put up the money. For which you ought to say thank God you're being given the opportunity. Stand up and do your duty. Don't quibble about it. Don't take a long time to argue about all these silly arrangements.

Harris said empowerment took place two years ago on the Mall. You were empowered to do something. Okay, set up your line of credit so that you can draw it down as you need to [9:00]. Number two, reach for levels which no one has ever dreamed of or has spoken about. And there are five groups of money to be reached for. There is a \$25 million level that has to be set, and there are about forty people in America who are capable of doing that. And you know what that is? That's a billion dollars.

You know what you can do with a billion dollars? Because the people who are capable of giving that kind of money give it to you in cash, and if they haven't got the cash, they go borrow it. That's their problem. If you've got \$1 billion in cash money, you have \$75 million a year [10:00] in interest coming in. The \$75 million a year in interest coming in is more than the whole Passage to Freedom campaign raised last year. It didn't raise 50 million bucks. It was terrible, because half the year was wasted in arguing whether it should be spent locally, or whether it should be spent through Israel. The intricate formulae that were devised were a disgrace. Nobody was thinking.

Take that big pool from the very top of the cream of the people who are able to give it, and go back to the old Jewish principle of making interest-free loans to Russian immigrants. Don't give him a dime. Loan him \$50,000 if he needs it, and he

owes you the money, and he's got to pay you back. No interest [11:00], so it doesn't hurt him. And he's got a long time to pay it back. And he's going to feel so good because he's independent, and he didn't live off somebody else's keft. He didn't live off somebody else's charity. You've made him independent from day one.

By the time he pays that back, it can be ten years later, it can be twenty years later, it doesn't matter, the people who put the money in are long since dead. Anyway, they've long since taken their tax deductibility for it, so they don't want the money back. You have a permanent fund -- permanent. This rich Jewish community has never collected a permanent fund of any kind of size. And a billion dollars is nothing, and it ought to quickly be built up to grow to five [12:00]. This billion-dollar pool, as I call it, is the base of the whole production of money.

Now, I said we've never built a pool. We do. We have a pool. We have a pool of some hundreds of millions of dollars owned by all of the communities, which are called the community endowment funds. And the community endowment funds have to put up about \$100 million of this \$420. A million here, and a million there, and two million here, pretty soon, it adds up to real money. And there ought to be an assignment made, simple

assignment made to all of the community endowment funds, depending upon what they have. And they will not be honest, and they will shelter some of it, but never mind [13:00]. There's room for cushions there. You simply assign 100 million bucks, and it will be forthcoming.

A whole pattern has to be organized with the approval of the Russian government, and that begins with the Russian ambassador in Washington. Start there and it will go quickly up to the Kremlin, in order to make sure that you're not doing anything in violation of their sensitivities. A whole pattern of missions to Russia. I started the concept of missions to Israel and took the first one in 1955, and I fought like a crazy man, and I managed to get twelve people. And the first mission that ever went to Israel had twelve people on it. And from 1955 today to 1990, you are talking about almost 10,000 people [14:00] a year who go through Israel on missions. I would like to suggest that in the year 1990, this year, a planeload a week, every week, one load, 200 people for fifty weeks. Two hundred people for fifty weeks gives you 10,000 people.

Ten thousand people going to the Soviet Union, charge them 500 bucks each, and every gift is a \$10,000 gift. You can make every gift a \$25,000 gift, if you want. People who will give 1,000 bucks to the campaign, people who will give 2,000 bucks to

the campaign have got to be asked, over this three-year period, for ten and fifteen -- the kind of money they never in their lives dreamed they would ever give or ever be able to give, and may have trouble paying off [15:01]. But never mind. It's good for them, because they will have the privilege of burning the mortgage. There's no fun if you don't take the mortgage.

Take the mortgage, pay it off, burn it, and you feel free. I'm not joking. Everybody has got to stretch. Everybody has got to do something he never thought he had to do before. You don't understand that if you fail on this one, the likelihood of your getting another opportunity in your lifetime, average age thirty-eight, is slim. So grab this one. You'll feel right about it. You'll feel that you are an author of history, not an observer. I liked his phrase. And you will find out that it's possible, never mind that what scares you now [16:00] is the cost of putting your kids through college. It scared me to death. I had five that I had to do it with. I did. I'm alive. They're alive. It's all over, just beginning for you. I'm seventy-two. It will take a long time to get it all over, but what's the difference?

Don't worry about the kids in college. You are going to have to, in the next twenty or thirty days, make your mind up as to what you're going to give personally, if you haven't already

done so. And you better realize that you are part of that pool of people that ought to get on one of those airplanes to Moscow. And you don't have to stay there more than two or three days. And I've got a whole program worked out on paper of what you ought to do that. Everybody, you could all do the same. You've all been on enough missions to Israel [17:00]. You make up an itinerary of what you want to have on a mission to Moscow, and the UJA ought to give it to you. And if the UJA won't give it to you from the national office, then sit down with [Sarnat?] in Atlanta, and sit down with blah-blah-blah in every town, and sit down with your local guys, and they'll give it to you.

You need something for the big people, not the \$25 million, but there are hundreds of people in this country who can give \$1 million. Nobody has ever asked, or asked in a perfunctory way, or in a silly way, or not in the historic context of what we're talking about. It's always asked in a wishful thinking way. "Oh, if we could only get somebody in town to give a million bucks." Why should he? Now, why shouldn't he [18:00], especially if a lot of other people are going to do it, too?

You get yourself a bunch of Wexner type airplanes, Gulfstream IVs and Gulfstream IIIs and the big advanced Lears and the best things going, and they have ten or twelve seats each. That's all they got, and it goes at a million bucks a

seat. And let me tell you something, if you can get [Belzberg's?] plane, and you can get Simon's plane, and you can get [Fischer's] plane, and you can get Wexner's plane, and you can get Taubman's plane, and da-da-da-da-da-da, and you can get fifty airplanes, you'll send one airplane a week with five, six, seven people on it. Because you going to leave three or four seats on it that, after these characters have flown to Moscow -- it's only eight hours [19:00] from New York to Moscow -- and they've seen what they've seen, and they've had their lunch in the Kremlin and da-da-da, they're going to pick up three or four Russian Jews and fly them from Moscow to Tel Aviv. They don't need any intergovernmental permissions for direct flights. And they'll come back from that trip three days later, and the six of them or the seven of them have given their million bucks each. And it will accelerate and accelerate week after week, week after week.

Set up a fax network among all the Federation offices and just shoot the names out, who did it this week, who did it this week, who did it to whom on whose plane [laughter]. And you've got yourself a momentum going in America in which everybody is beginning to feel like this is a crusade that's going to work. The injection of faith and enthusiasm and technology [20:00] all have to work together.

And I'm not inventing any wheels here in front of you, because all this has been done before. But it's done in a certain tempo that I'm suggesting, and at a certain rhythm, and at a certain volume, and at a certain level which has not been tried before. And that's the difference between [*shigrati?*], between listening to routine talk about how are we going to do this, and shall we have our big gifts dinner with pink tablecloths or blue tablecloths. Good God.

I think that I would load onto the non-Jewish community through some kind of big corporate division, something between \$250 and \$500 million. And I would get somebody like Iacocca or Ross Perot. And these are guys who care. I'm not [21:00] just talking some rich non-Jew. Somebody who cares. I once sat in a helicopter with Ross Perot going over the Sinai Desert, and I thought that my task was to try to explain to him the map below. We were sitting with maps on our laps, and the stretch of the burned-out Arab tanks -- this was after the Six Day War. Guy wasn't interested in that at all. Couldn't care less. He says, "You've got a map. We're looking out the window. What I want you to show me is the route that Moses took." [laughter]

So I say to him, "What do you care about that?" He says, "I read the Bible [22:00]." Dallas, Texas, not far from here, a lot of people read the Bible. And I think if it were put to him

right, he would take the chairmanship of a corporate division, you want to call it Christian division, I don't care. And you load onto it 250 or 500, and it's absolutely doable in my judgment. Absolutely doable.

You've got to cultivate it. Isn't going to happen just because you say you want it to happen. But it's an approach. You get a lineup of people, Christian and Jewish. You go talk to what's-his-name at Bank One in Columbus, and if Leslie pops for the big number, and if Leslie puts his airplane at the disposal of this million-dollar thing, you think that John McCoy isn't going to put Bank One in the forefront of a large corporate move? He certainly will. Wexner is on the board of that bank [23:00].

So there's muscle, and there's power, and if you mobilize the power toward a very specific objective... I think you have to do something for the smaller people, because they can't be left out of this thing, nor should they be. And they may not be able to give a million dollars or \$25,000 or numbers like that. But for people who have either never given anything or given 100 bucks, I think we have to create something like a \$1,000 Russian rescue bond. It's a nice number, \$1,000 bond.

And I think we've got 450,000 Jewish students in this country, 450,000 nineteen- and twenty-year-olds. I would empower

them with Polaroid pictures in plastic little identity cards [24:00], which would entitle them to go from house to house to house to house, knocking on every Jewish door in town and ask for that \$1,000 Russian rescue bond.

Guy says, "\$1,000?" You're going to get your money back in fifteen years, with interest. Don't forget, we've got that billion-dollar pool sitting there. You can pay this back. Every Jew in this country has got to participate in this and be given a chance to at a level which is within his reach. And I'm not just talking idealism; I'm talking money, because I think there's 100 million bucks in those \$1,000 dollar Russian rescue bonds.

You know what I'm talking about takes a massive amount of organization? It takes a large, dedicated staff [25:00]. It takes no wasting of time in all of the preparations. They're all essentially simple, because they've all been done before. It takes a very, very nifty crew of volunteer lay leaders. There's none better in the whole country than you, and this is where you ought to put your talents. And if everything that I wrote goes into the wastebasket as far as the upper stratosphere of the UJA is concerned and they can't get their act together to do anything, then you take any parts of this that you want and try

to put it to work in your own town, and nobody will say to you nay.

The last thing I would recommend is this. You've got to personalize this. You've got to personalize it. David Harris [26:00] mentioned the name of Leonid Feldman twice in his talk, because Leonid Feldman has made a personal impact on him. As knowledgeable and as sensitive and as absolutely conversant as he is with the whole subject, still, he has one thing which has nothing to do with knowledge. It has to do with passion. He's got passion, and if some of that passion came from Leonid, and if that's the source, fine. And if it came from some other Jew whom he met in the Soviet Union at some other time, fine.

I would like to make the following suggestion. I would like to have you search out for your town four very, very special Russian Jews. I would like you [27:00] to use a man or a woman for ninety days, and after that, he or she is worn out, and so you need another one for the next ninety days, [*b'tor anut*]. And then next one, and the next one, so four times ninety will carry you through all year. I want you to take that person and put him in the home for breakfast, lunch, or dinner, or tea, or evening talk, or whatever, of every single Jew in town who gave to the regular campaign from \$500 and up. And I think that he or she can see five people every day, five people every day, and that

means that you can see about 1,500 or 2,000 people [28:00] in the course of the year. Personal, face-to-face. He's sitting at your luncheon table, and he's talking to you about what life was like in the Soviet Union, and what letters he's getting from people who are still there, and what his fears are, and what the latest pamphlet he saw distributed around the streets. "Marx was a Jew." "Lenin's grandmother was a Jew."

The whole list of communism, which is now under attack, is being laid at the feet of Jews. They invented it. They created it. They're the villains. He'll tell you everything that he knows, everything that he feels. He gives you his analysis, and all you have to do is look in his eyes, and he'll look in your eyes, and the contact is made. And he doesn't have to ask you for one bloody thing. Nothing [29:00].

But after he has lunch in somebody's house, the next day, you have to call the guy up. You have to call the guy up the next day. Don't wait forty-eight hours; twenty-four is the most. And say, "I want 10,000 bucks. Don't drop dead. Just say yes, and I'll come and explain to you how you can handle it. I'm going to bring the paper over to sign. Good bye." No? You'll get it or you won't, or you'll get half of it, but you can't lose. No way to lose. The only way you lose is if you don't ask, and

if you don't ask, then you've lost your whole life. And that's really what you're confronted with [30:00].

You bring into face-to-face contact every person who is a prospective giver with somebody who has the legitimate right to explain what the need is. It's never been done in that volume before. We always talk about doing it. We kid ourselves, and we talk about doing it two on one. We never even do it one on one! I can't stand the hypocrisy! You want to do something? You know how to do it. You don't want to do it, don't do it. But then, don't come crying about a missed historic opportunity. And don't come around to your kids twenty-five and thirty years from now with some kind of fake story about what did you do in the Great War, Daddy? And you make up a story, and you tell the kid a lie [31:00]. Don't tell the kid some lie thirty years from now about why you didn't do something now, which you can do! Nobody is asking you to do anything you can't do. It's only a question about your will to do it. So that's where you stand in the face of history.

Everything that I've said may be nonsense. Everything I've said you may just say, "Fantasy. He's bluffing. It's un-doable." But as you see, I have run out of voice, and you are now very fortunate with that fact. So I will finish by saying simply I believe in you. You are much more intelligent, and you are much

better educated than the generation one or two generations before you [32:00]. You have no fear in you, as the American Jew did in the thirties and forties, which paralyzed him. You have more education. You have less, if any, fear. You have thirdly, a good sense of organization. The communities are organized much better than they were forty and fifty years ago. And there isn't a reason under the sun why you shouldn't take this in your stride, thanking God every single day that the opportunity is being given to you. Seizing it with a certain smile, instead of a grimace, with a sense of grace, with a sense of thankfulness, and with a sense that duty is duty, and you're going to do it [33:00].

Okay, that's it. [applause]

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