

# Group Weaves Jewish Themes Into Training for Social-Justice Leaders

By Nicole Lewis

**R**EBECA EPSTEIN was skeptical when she was asked to apply to the Selah Leadership Program, a national training effort for Jewish leaders at social-justice organizations. After all, she was not active in Jewish life.

"I was not sure this was going to be the community for me," says Ms. Epstein, a senior director at Planned Parenthood Federation of America. "I was totally wrong."

Not only did Ms. Epstein complete the program but the training, self-reflection, and personal connections derived from Selah eventually prompted her to leave her job as a nonprofit management consultant and seek out the job she holds now.

"Selah gave me the confidence to be a good coach as a young person as well as the courage to leave that pretty safe role and put my own skills to the test as a manager," says Ms. Epstein, who has also served a two-year stint on the program's advisory board. "It gave me the permission to become a leader."

## Reflect and Learn

Selah seeks to strengthen Jewish social-justice leaders and their organizations by providing leadership training and establishing a professional support network to keep them connected to one another and to what they learned during the program.

The program is a project of Bend the Arc: a Jewish Partnership for Justice, a nonprofit that advocates for social

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change, and the Nathan Cummings Foundation.

Selah's training sessions are run by the Rockwood Leadership Institute, a nonprofit group that provides leadership training for people at advocacy organizations. The word "selah," which means "rock" in Hebrew, appears in Hebrew prayers, signaling a moment of reflection before delving into the next passage.

The program's organizers hope to offer participants a similar opportunity to reflect and then to learn and grow.

"Most of us in the nonprofit world do not get formal training on how to successfully navigate and embody new leadership roles, and then we are not set up to reach the potential we have," says Stosh Cotler, executive vice president for Bend the Arc and a Selah past participant and administrator. "Selah is one answer to bridge that gap: what we know should happen and making it real in the world."

## Practical Ideas

Surveys show that 53 percent of Selah participants regularly apply what they learned at their jobs, and 37 percent sometimes do.

Now in its ninth year, the program has more than 275 graduates from more than 200 organizations. It receives three times as many applicants as it can place in each class of 22 to

26 people, who complete a six-month training program.

Some of the classes draw from a national applicant pool and others incorporate participants from only one region, such as Boston, Washington, or the Bay Area.

The group gathers for a few days at the beginning and end of the program to work with Rockwood Leadership Institute trainers and one another on identifying leadership principles and putting them to work.

In between the program's two group meetings, participants complete weekly homework assignments. They also follow the Jewish concept of *chevruta*,

*Program participants study in pairs and are encouraged to share the lessons they receive with their staffs.*

studying in pairs and speaking with their partner daily to recite their sense of purpose and keep them mindful of skills they are striving to learn.

Andrea Levere, president of the Corporation for Enterprise Development, called her Selah partner from the train on her way to work to recite her phrase: "To bring honesty and commitment to all my relationships and to the movement to increase economic justice in this country."

While she eschewed some of what she refers to as the "touchy-feely" elements of the program, Ms. Levere says she absorbed practical ideas that she shared with her senior staff members. Most helpful: strategies for determining which issues need immediate attention and which ones can be set aside.

Sharing these lessons with colleagues represents a key program goal, says Ms. Cotler. "We knew we didn't have enough money to train everyone," she says. "We are focusing on those people who have the biggest ability to take back those skills they were learning as individuals and push them out into their organizations."

Robert Bank, executive vice president of American Jewish World Service, found the focus on work-life balance particularly valuable.

"In social change, the work is never-ending," says Mr. Bank. "I will be a better leader if I am not constantly focusing on work." He often logs long hours at his job but also exercises with a trainer twice a week, takes bike rides, and is trying out meditation.

His attitude trickles down to the people he manages, ostensibly the next generation of leaders. "If you don't sustain yourself, you will burn out," he says.

## Advocacy Group

The Nathan Cummings Foundation is the primary supporter of Selah, contributing a total of \$1.9-million. Bend the Arc estimates the cost at \$7,000 per person; participants' organizations contribute \$600 to \$1,500, depending on their budgets.

The Cummings foundation places a high value on helping leaders evolve and succeed.

"You address problems and take on

## Selah Leadership Program

**Who's eligible:** The program, run by the Nathan Cummings Foundation and Bend the Arc, in collaboration with the Rockwood Leadership Institute, seeks applicants with a "religious, cultural, or other Jewish identity" who have at least seven years of experience in the social-justice field; who hold a "position of influence" in an organization; and whose job requires collaboration with or supervision of personnel. Applicants may work for a non-Jewish or secular social-change organization.

**Cost to participants:** \$600 to \$1,500, on a sliding scale based on an organization's annual budget

**To apply:** Go to the Bend the Arc Web site.

**Deadline for applications:** June 27, 2013

issues through very talented leaders," says Simon Greer, the foundation's president. "If you put money in policy and media and all sorts of other advocacy but don't tend to the real people who have to do that work, you end up undermining your own investment."


The foundation is exploring using the Selah model in other causes it supports, including poverty and the arts, says Mr. Greer, to teach leaders of those groups to work more collaboratively.

Leaders of Jewish social-justice groups who have participated in Selah are now joining forces to push for change through the Jewish Social Justice Roundtable, a joint effort they

hope will achieve more than any one organization could alone. The group, also a project of the Cummings foundation, represents 26 organizations that work together to advocate on one big issue each year, such as changes to the nation's immigration system.

Ms. Cotler says the group formed largely because of the trusting, intense community many leaders experienced together through Selah in the past decade.

Mr. Greer concurs. Without Selah, he says, the program's alumni "would not have been ready for this moment to jump out as good partners and allies on something as pressing as immigration reform."


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