

Shrage to step down as head of Combined Jewish Philanthropies



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

In his office, Barry Shrage, the longtime leader of Combined Jewish Philanthropies.

By [Lisa Wangsness](#) | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 23, 2017

Barry Shrage is planning to step aside next year after three decades at the helm of Combined Jewish Philanthropies, an umbrella group for Jewish institutions in Greater Boston and one of the state's largest charitable institutions.

Shrage, 70, who has raised more than \$1 billion for the local Jewish community and developed partnerships with other charities, said he hopes to share some of his

he calls “pretty close to an obsession.”

Shrage has been a transformative force, more than doubling the annual budget of Jewish Boston’s philanthropic arm from \$24 million to \$57 million, and challenging it to be nimble and creative in tackling the emergent challenges of a changing community.

A champion of Jewish learning as a way to build Jewish identity in the face of assimilation and secularization, he created an adult study program called Me’ah that has drawn some 5,000 people to make a serious commitment — 100 hours over two years — to the study of Jewish texts and tradition. He supported the creation of new Jewish day schools and plowed money into special education for religious schools.

He invested in sending young people to Israel, betting that personal connections would strengthen ties between Jewish Bostonians and Israel.

And, long before some of his peers, he searched for ways to include individuals previously marginalized or excluded from Jewish life — intermarried couples, gays and lesbians, people with disabilities, the poor.

One result: A study last year found that intermarriage, once seen as an existential threat to the Jewish community, seemed to actually be helping the community grow in Boston because **so many interfaith couples were raising their children as Jewish.**

“It’s an extraordinary thing to both have the vision and creativity to come up with programs, but to also have the personality to work with many other institutions and people to bring them to reality,” said Neil Wallack, chairman of the CJP board.

Rabbi Elaine Zecher of Temple Israel of Boston said Shrage’s hallmark is “his expansiveness, his inclusiveness . . . his great respect for every person.”

In her first job in a Jewish organization, she said, some had trouble addressing her by her title. Not Shrage.

“Here was an Orthodox man calling a Reform woman ‘rabbi’ — this was three decades ago, a different era” she said.

The board appointed Shira Goodman, CEO of Staples, and Aron J. Ain, CEO of Kronos, to run a national search for Shrage’s replacement with the help of an outside firm.

Wallack said Shrage’s departure is unrelated to criticism regarding a \$1.34 million one-time payment he received in 2014 after the board determined, on the advice of an outside firm, that he had been undercompensated for years.

The payout, which came on top of Shrage’s \$343,000 in base salary and \$220,000 in other compensation and benefits that year, was disclosed when CJP filed its tax returns last year and first reported by The Forward in December.

Some observers criticized the board for being overly generous, or for failing to announce the payment. Shrage said Thursday it never occurred to him to do so because charities rarely announce salaries outside of their tax disclosures.

“It was always a concern to me to be careful about my salary, and I was always arguing

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Rabbi Elaine Zecher of Temple Israel noted Shrage’s (right) ‘inclusiveness . . . his great respect for every person.’

that he did not request the one-time payment.

At a time when hope is diminishing for a two-state solution and many Jews oppose the Israeli government policy of expanding settlements in the West Bank, Combined Jewish Philanthropies is kicking off a round of community discussions about Israel.

Shrage acknowledged the concern and division among US Jews, but expressed optimism that dialogue “rooted in love” could be productive.

An early supporter of Shrage’s efforts to forge connections between Boston and Israel was New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft, whose late wife, Myra, worked closely with Shrage over many years.

“Barry got a disproportionate share of her time, really, because of the human being he was, and how genuine he was, and how caring for all people,” Kraft said, adding the couple especially appreciated Shrage’s work with nonprofits across the city, and with people from every community.

Under Shrage’s leadership, CJP often partnered with charities outside the Jewish community and invested in Jewish institutions that serve refugees, people with disabilities, and low-income people.

Michael Durkin, CEO of United Way of Massachusetts Bay and Merrimack Valley, said that once, on a trip to Israel with Shrage, they encountered a homeless man asking for money. Durkin asked Shrage whether he normally gives money under such circumstances.

Shrage said he did, and related a religious story about a needy man who dies on a roadside while awaiting help from a traveler he asks for assistance.

“It was one of the most profound statements on how do we act on behalf of others,” Durkin said. “For Boston, Barry’s been a model of that.”

Shrage said he remains optimistic about the Jewish future despite national and local surveys showing declining synagogue membership and affiliation with Jewish institutions. Those that offer meaningful experiences and spirituality will thrive, he said, which is why CJP has invested in enhancing synagogue life.

Shrage said he views his own future with excitement but also a bit of trepidation. He said his future role with CJP needs to be hammered out.

“At one point a couple of years ago I began to think, for me and the work I want to do, maybe it’s better for me not to be the CEO anymore, but to continue in another relationship,” he said.

He said he may pursue an academic affiliation in addition to his nonprofit work. He also hopes to complete a book he’s been working on for 15 years.

“It’s about the Jewish future,” he said. “What else would it be?”

Lisa Wangsness can be reached at lisa.wangsness@globe.com.