

Leadership Skills Summit Welcome and Introduction
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Welcome to the Wexner Foundation Alumni Summit on Leadership Skills!

Thank you to the Summit team: Angie Atkins, Ra'anana Avital, Elisha Gechter, and our amazing admin support from Chief of Staff Rachel Sosin, and fantastic tech and design help from our Director of Communication Becca Thomas. We are grateful as always to our president Rabbi Elka Abrahamson who has kept our ship afloat and sailing onward amidst the storm.

Since we originally planned this Summit, our world has changed profoundly. We have realized how quickly our basic assumptions and sense of safety can be washed away. We are newly aware of how much we take for granted the functioning of our economy and our health care systems. We have learned viscerally how interconnected we all are. And we have seen how leadership can make all the difference when lives are on the line.

One of the primary characteristics of leaders in any time is flexibility and adaptability in the face of changing circumstances, and especially in times of crisis. We have attempted to model that leadership behavior in deciding to move forward with this Summit remotely. Our original goals for the Summit were to deepen the leadership skills of our alumni and to weave our incredible network more tightly together. In a world turned upside down, those goals are more relevant than ever. So we adjust, we trim, we tinker, we overhaul, we refocus. And here we are.

We know that in this time of radical uncertainty, fear, and even loss, time is precious and priorities are shifted. We don't take it for granted that you kept this time carved out for learning and connecting across the Wexner network. Thank you all for being here. We hope and trust that both the learning and the connecting will feed your soul and make you a better leader in these dire times.

At such moments of rupture and dislocation, the texts of our tradition serve as our strong root system, anchoring us to the profound and enduring values of Jewish life. Our master narratives teach us time and again that wisdom and redemption come through *fearful journeys of transformation*.

In *Parashat Vayishlach*, Genesis chapter 32, *Ya'acov Avinu*, our ancestor Jacob, is alone and frightened in the dark night as he flees the vengeance of his brother

Esau. Ya'acov passes that night in fitful struggle... with what? An angel? His own demons? Whatever the nature of his foe, Ya'acov is in mortal danger. And he emerges from the struggle wounded, but somehow stronger. His struggle becomes a formal part of him in his new name, *Yisrael*, and the legacy he passes on to us, the children of Israel. We are the people that faces mortal fear, struggles mightily, and perseveres to live the sacred values of our covenant with God for another day.

Ester Hamalkah, Queen Esther from the Purim Megilla, faces a similar moment of truth when she realizes the fate of the entire Jewish community is in her hands. She must balance the risk to her own life with the risk that her whole people may perish. Esther gathers the courage to face that fear and creatively pivots. She uses her wits and her charm to strategically outmaneuver a fearsome adversary. In so doing, she transforms from a beauty contest winner to a leader who commands respect both among her own people and in her broader role as Queen.

Journeys of transformation, marked by fear and uncertainty. In our master narrative, that is where we learn the lessons of real leadership.

Most of us in our leadership do not face literal life or death situations like Ya'acov and Esther. Yet we are all living through a moment of fear and uncertainty. This is a time where our collective decisions will have a profound effect on the future of our Jewish communities and our cities, states, and nations.

In moments like this, it may not be Jacob's wrestling or Esther's cunning and courage that is the right model for us. Perhaps the model for us is the well-known Hasidic tale of Zusya from Anopol.

Reb Zusya was laying on his deathbed surrounded by his disciples. He was crying and no one could comfort him. One student asked his Rebbe, "Why do you cry? You were almost as wise as Moses and as kind as Abraham." Reb Zusya answered, "When I pass from this world and appear before the Heavenly Tribunal, they won't ask me, 'Zusya, why weren't you as wise as Moses or as kind as Abraham.' Rather, they will ask me, 'Zusya, why weren't you Zusya?' Why didn't I fulfill my potential, why didn't I follow the path that could have been mine."

We each have a role to play in helping our communities cope with the overwhelming challenges that confront us. This was always true, but all the more so today. How do we find our specific path of leadership, our highest contribution, so that we will look back on this moment without the tears of regret shed by Reb Zusya?

We need to cultivate a sharp, unsparing, expansive sense of self-awareness. What are our unique gifts? What are the obstacles that prevent us from fulfilling our potential? Where are our circles of influence? What is the contribution to this world that each of us alone is suited to make? This self-exploration is captured powerfully in the concept of Authentic Leadership. Think of it as a modern twist on the Zusya story.

There is nobody better suited to guide us through the process of becoming ever more authentic in our leadership than Professor Dana Born. Dana brings to this topic decades of celebrated leadership as both an academic and a practitioner. We have shared her bio with you and I'll only mention that in addition to being Co-Director at the Center for Public Leadership and Lecturer in Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School of Government, she is a retired Brigadier General with 30 years of service in the United States Air Force. Prior to coming to Harvard she served two terms as the Dean of the Faculty at the United States Air Force Academy where she was also the Professor and Head of the Behavioral Sciences and Leadership Department.