

MAZON NEWS

SPRING 2025



40TH ANNIVERSARY INTERVIEW EDITION

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LETTER FROM LEADERSHIP

Dear Friends,

It would be an honor to serve as the Chair of MAZON's Board of Directors at any time. But to do so as our organization celebrates its 40th anniversary is truly remarkable.

Four decades ago, our founders — Leonard "Leibel" Fein, Theodore Mann, and Irv Cramer, all of blessed memory — launched a bold and audacious project to build a bridge between the commitment of the American Jewish community to social justice and the desperate need felt by millions of people living with hunger.

Today, their legacy continues as MAZON is one of the leading national organizations fighting to change the systems that allow food insecurity to persist in this country. In the coming pages, you will read about that work directly from some of our key partners — those who are impacted by our work and those who are leaders in this work. You will hear from our grantee partners, both in the United States and Israel. You will hear from a student leader and synagogue staffer engaging their community in joy and in justice. You will hear from elected officials and long-standing partners. And you will hear from MAZON's own staff, who have dedicated their careers to food justice and the vital work of MAZON.

These days, it's more important than ever for us to rely on our *kehillah* — our community. In the Jewish faith, we are taught that to live a full life, we must do so together. Our synagogues play a vital role in our communities and are more than just places of worship — they are centers for our children to learn and play, for our elders to gather in times of grief and of joy, for all of us to celebrate with a communal meal. MAZON's work depends, too, on building and holding fast to our *kehillah*. It is how MAZON was founded 40 years ago, building our *kehillah* through the commitment to justice and *tzedakah* of synagogues nationwide to support our work and our cause. And it is how we continue to work towards our goals today, with renewed commitment and resolve to fight for what we know is right.

The legacy of MAZON's founders lives on today through our work and remarkable team, led by our President & CEO of 14 years, Abby J. Leibman. During her tenure, Abby has been a truly visionary leader in the Jewish social justice space as well as the anti-hunger community. She has overseen remarkable growth in MAZON's leadership and its impact in fighting hunger in America and Israel. She has guided MAZON to shine a light on specific populations with unique hunger challenges who are too often overlooked by policymakers, most recently with a clarion call to support transgender youth in America. And her work to invest in our advocacy efforts has helped us address hunger at its root causes, honoring and fulfilling our founders' dream of making a true difference in the lives of millions.

And so I invite you to spend time with the conversations in this newsletter. As I did, you may find the interviews within to be enlightening and inspiring, uplifting and hopeful. And at times, you may find them stirring a fire within you to stand up and act.

It was that fire — that call to action — that led to MAZON's founding 40 years ago. It is that fire that keeps us going today. I am deeply proud of our work, as we continue to honor our legacy while embracing our future. I hope you'll join us in this work — you have my eternal thanks for your support and partnership.



With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Carolyn Tisdale".

Carolyn Tisdale

MAZON BOARD CHAIR



Use this QR code
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interview in the newsletter

Rabbi David Saperstein,

Director Emeritus of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, interviewed by **Max Samis**, MAZON's Director of Communications



Max: When did you first learn about MAZON?

Rabbi Saperstein: It was 1983 or '84 when I got a call from Leibel Fein (z"l). He was looking for advice about this idea of MAZON, this idea of having a Jewish organization devoted to combating hunger. His idea was to ask people to fund this by taking 3% of the simcha celebrations and donating it to MAZON. No one that I can remember had ever tried to do anything like that, and it would require buy-in if this was really going to work. He traveled around the country, drawing on various connections from his leading role as a liberal ideological thinker and writer in the Jewish community. Eventually, he got the Central Conference of American Rabbis and others to formally endorse his idea. The word spread, and donating to MAZON became a very common part of celebrations in the Jewish community.

Max: What does the issue of hunger mean to you on a personal and professional level?

Rabbi Saperstein: One can't be a rabbi who takes the social justice tradition of the Jewish community and text seriously and not take just as seriously the need to combat hunger. The mitzvah of setting aside a corner of the field was a way to ensure that strangers passing through the community, as well as the community itself, would be provided for. And the prophetic call to deal our bread to the hungry has resonated through the centuries, all the way to MAZON, which merged the tradition of giving *tzedakah* with the *mitzvot* of taking care of the poor and hungry.

Max: What stands out to you about MAZON in the broader Jewish social justice community?

Rabbi Saperstein: MAZON's model is deeply and intuitively Jewish — the way that we mesh charity and policy. Very quickly, it became obvious to Leibel and everyone else that you couldn't win the battle against hunger only by feeding people, but instead by changing policies to help eliminate hunger. MAZON infused this into

other social justice causes, and this has had an enormous impact on the programmatic life of synagogues.

Max: Where do you think advocates can best put our collective energy in the next few years to really make a difference?

Rabbi Saperstein: This is a crossroads moment for America, and there are a number of things that we can do to ensure that we don't lose the social safety net that millions of people need to survive. One is educating our communities about the nature of hunger, and the terrible impact it has on people.

We have to be sophisticated and tactical about what's going to work in this extraordinary moment, but I know that in the hunger field, MAZON is the jewel of the American Jewish community. So this organization is going to be more important than ever in the years to come.



"Since 1982, the annual Spago Seder has raised funds to help MAZON's mission and to bring awareness of its ongoing work. It's a tangible way I can give back. People from all backgrounds come together to share a fabulous meal, listen to uplifting music, and enjoy each other's company, all while supporting others."

Barbara Lazaroff, MAZON Supporter

A Conversation between
Abby J. Leibman,
MAZON's President & CEO, and
Mia Hubbard,
MAZON's Executive Vice President

Abby: You and MAZON have gone through transitions, and you've always had a deep and abiding commitment to the concerns of people who are food insecure. What was our nation's experience of food insecurity when you first began your work with MAZON?

Mia: When I joined MAZON in 1993, the nation was coming off of a period of disinvesting in our federal safety net programs during the Reagan era. The government was pulling back from its commitment to addressing hunger during the 1980s, and in response, we saw significant growth in the nation's network of charitable food programs. MAZON quickly identified the need to get these community programs working on the frontline of hunger relief to engage in advocacy, and we invested millions of dollars to support that priority.

The other big piece of our work during those early years was building state-level advocacy organizations. We became known for our early



investments in state-level advocacy — many of these early partners became preeminent, successful, and well-known statewide organizations that are a critical part of this nation's network of anti-hunger advocates.

Abby: This is something that's always stood out to me about MAZON — some people try to distance themselves from the idea of advocacy. But advocacy is a crucial part of democracy. It's not forbidden, and in fact, it's what our system was set up to do — that people have this opportunity to engage with their policymakers. MAZON has never shied away from this. And speaking of which, can you remember the first big advocacy effort that you engaged in during the early days of MAZON?

Mia: Yes, welfare reform in 1996 was a turning point, because we really began to think differently about our role as a grantmaker and even as an advocacy organization. Welfare reform transformed the landscape for advocacy in our field, and it forced MAZON to intensify funding, advocacy, and other strategic efforts to protect and expand food stamp access. It wasn't enough to get food banks and pantries to be advocates. It wasn't even enough to support anti-hunger advocacy organizations. MAZON had to lend its voice to national advocacy efforts. I will always remember that time, and frankly we are still dealing with the after-effects.

Abby: The idea of identifying our strategic advocacy priorities is a



central tenet of how we approach our work. One of those priorities is food insecurity in Indian Country, and you've been really instrumental in leading that particular priority. Can you reflect on what characterizes the way you approached this priority?

Mia: A central part of our approach is to listen and learn, and to go about this work with humility. In Indian Country, we have some amazing partners who helped us understand the painful history of injustice, how our government's harmful policies have contributed to food insecurity, and how we can be an effective ally. That has served us well in that work and in those relationships. And it's really been a privilege, frankly, and I think it's an area where MAZON has been unique. We're learning every day.

Abby: What's on the horizon? What do you see in MAZON's future?

Mia: We are in a major fight for the foreseeable future, and as an organization, we'll continue to be brave and persistent and creative in our work. I hope that MAZON will continue to do what we've done under your leadership, which is to take calculated risks and take some bigger swings. I hope we will push for that larger vision that we've been discussing. As anti-hunger advocates, we believe that people should have access to food, regardless of their background, regardless of their circumstance, regardless of what state they live in, regardless of politics.

Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky, U.S. Representative for Illinois' 9th District, interviewed by Sammi Goldsmith, MAZON's Deputy Director of Public Policy



Sammi: What is your connection to MAZON and to the issue of hunger?

Rep. Schakowsky: Every year I attend the National Hunger Seder on Capitol Hill alongside many Members of Congress, both Jewish and not Jewish. It's such a meaningful way

for people to learn about the traditions and learn about MAZON. I try to be there every single year. And I'm so proud that my rabbi at Beth Emet is a supporter of MAZON as well. It is essential to fight hunger because here we are, the richest country in the world, getting richer every day, and yet so many people in the U.S. aren't sure how they will put food on the table or feed their children. Shame on us as the richest country in the world.

Sammi: What do you say to your colleagues in Congress who are trying right now to cut nutrition assistance programs like SNAP?

Rep. Schakowsky: It's absolutely shocking. Are they going to go after the student lunches and breakfasts, and are they going to want to take those things away? It's unthinkable! I mean, don't they live in communities where families are struggling? I think that most Americans agree that food and nutrition are basic needs.

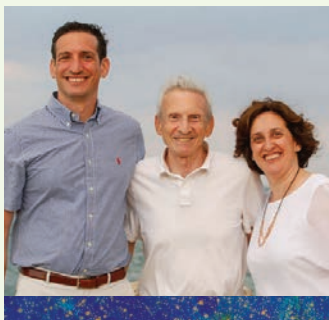
Sammi: What are your hopes for the next 40 years of MAZON?

Rep. Schakowsky: You know, it would be so beautiful if in the next 40 years, it was taken for granted that people would have enough food. My hope is that we can gather and say a blessing that we are so fortunate to live in the U.S. where people have sufficient food, that our children can grow up strong and healthy, and that all people can live their lives.

Sammi: What treat would you bring to MAZON's 40th birthday party?

Rep. Schakowsky: I would like to bring lox and have just a nibble.

Lisa Jericho, MAZON Supporter, interviewed by Naama Haviv, MAZON's Vice President of Community Engagement



Naama: Tell me about your father Ronald Jericho, of blessed memory, who brought you and your family into MAZON's circle.

Lisa: My father was a quiet, unassuming person. He led with his gratitude. His philosophy about

philanthropy was to make sure people have a basic degree of dignity in their lives and opportunities to better themselves.

Naama: Your father once shared that part of his inspiration in supporting MAZON and our Indian Country work was based on his parents fleeing the Holocaust.

Lisa: That sounds like Dad. He instinctively understood that

there were members of our society that historically were treated horribly for just existing.

Naama: It's so incredible that your father understood hunger from his own family's history and wanted to apply those lessons to MAZON's work with Indigenous communities.

Lisa: He always inspired me to think about life in generations. With each generation, we learn from what our parents did and try to do a little bit better. I don't mean just financially. I mean, what did we *learn*? Dad laid this beautiful foundation to think through philanthropy, impact, who we care for, and our obligations. Now I get to think about it in a more thoughtful and strategic way because I had such a beautiful foundation. It started with a tin *tzedakah* box. Every Friday he'd pull out singles for my brother and me to put in. It's a priority for me to pass his legacy down for generations to come.

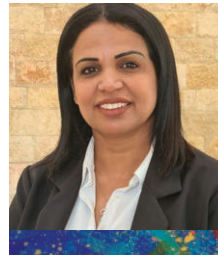
Hanan Alsanah, Co-Executive Director of Itach Ma'aki: Women Lawyers for Social Justice, interviewed by Michal Schechter, MAZON's Israel New Media Associate

Michal: When did you first learn about MAZON?

Hanan: I met Ishai (MAZON's Israel Director) a few years ago, when I was working in the field supporting the Bedouin community in unrecognized villages. We started working together to make sure there was enough food for everybody in the Bedouin community.

Michal: We all have been through a difficult year and a half. What is it like for the Bedouin community living in the Negev?

Hanan: Yes, and unfortunately, the war still continues. The Bedouin community is part of the Arab minority in Israel, making up about 30-35% of the population in the Negev, but we only live on 5% of the land. Some of



us live in recognized villages, and some live in unrecognized villages, which means that there are no basic services. Almost 80% of the Bedouin community lives below the poverty line, facing food insecurity. During the war, it has become even worse. The Israeli government has not addressed food insecurity. There is no strategy or structure to support Bedouin women and families facing food insecurity. They are citizens of Israel, but they do not appear on the map and therefore they do not exist in the system.

Michal: How does MAZON support your work?

Hanan: With MAZON's help, we provide both legal aid and food to Bedouin women, and we've been able to help over 3,000 families. Together, we bring the issue of food insecurity to decision-makers and force them to listen to the voices of the communities inside Israel — both Jewish and non-Jewish.



Besa Pinchotti, CEO of the National Military Family Association (NMFA), interviewed by Liza Lieberman, MAZON's Vice President of Public Affairs

Liza: How did you first become aware of MAZON?

Besa: I came to NMFA around 11 years ago, and that's right around when we started working with MAZON. Our organizations were both on Capitol Hill advocating against congressional efforts to cut SNAP and WIC, arguing that military families need these programs. And now, years later, who would have thought that our closest partner in fighting food insecurity in the military would be a Jewish organization? But MAZON is so special because it's not just work — it's actually a calling, and I feel that from every member of your team. And this is what drives so many people's military service, too. We share this sense of honor

and duty, and it draws us together.

Liza: What does the issue of hunger mean to you?

Besa: Food is something that no one should have to worry about, yet we know that one in four military families are food insecure. For me, this is not just a statistic — this is the story of my community. And MAZON brings such deep understanding, knowledge, and creative policy solutions to this issue, and also a sense of fierceness to the conversation. Leaders like Abby do not only demand action and change, but they inspire us to bring the same energy to the work we're doing together.

Liza: What are your hopes for this work in the years ahead?

Besa: My biggest dream is that we don't even need MAZON's leadership because our work is done. But in reality, we need 40 more years of MAZON's energy. I hope you continue to train the next generation of fierce advocates — I do not want to ever lose the passion that comes from MAZON as advocates, allies, and friends.



Sadaf Knight,
CEO of Florida Policy
Institute, interviewed by
Joey Hentzler, MAZON's
Program Manager

Joey: What's your connection to MAZON?

Sadaf: The Florida Policy Institute was fortunate to become a MAZON grantee in 2022. Since then, we have considered MAZON more than just a funder, but also supportive partners and friends.

Joey: How does MAZON's partnership enhance your work?

Sadaf: MAZON's support has enabled us to successfully mobilize a diverse array of partners from across the state to advocate for policies such as Pandemic EBT and Summer EBT, as well as to build momentum toward removing harmful policies such as the lifetime ban on SNAP and TANF for people convicted of drug trafficking and the expansion of work requirements. We have been able to elevate issues in the public dialogue — both with policymakers and the media — to highlight the important role of safety net programs for individuals, families, and our economy as a whole. We also were able to include food insecurity as a key part of "The Florida Timeline," a policy history project that illustrates the legacy of harmful policies enacted throughout our state's history, as well as our deep roots of resistance and resilience.

Joey: What makes MAZON a unique partner?

Sadaf: As a funder, MAZON embodies the idea of trust-based philanthropy. MAZON's approach to grantmaking in a state like Florida — where the challenges are formidable — recognizes that there is expertise and capacity that already exists, and that funders can serve as partners as we pursue systemic change over the long term. MAZON has been very helpful in making connections with other partners in our state and across the country and serving as a thought partner in our work.

Joey: What is your hope for MAZON's next 40 years?

Sadaf: I hope that our collaborative efforts make a real difference in the lives of people everywhere — and that we can turn our attention to ensuring that people not only are making ends meet but are also thriving and living lives unfettered by economic hardship and inequity.

Stella Nadelberg, MAZON LEFTY
Dinner Chair, and **Alex Bennett,**
Assistant Director of the Makom Teen Program
at Temple Isaiah in Lexington, Massachusetts,
interviewed by **Tammy Habteyes,** MAZON's
Senior Outreach Manager

Tammy: Every year since MAZON's founding, the teens of Temple Isaiah have hosted an annual community dinner. Can you tell us how you got involved and what it means to you?



Stella: I started in the kitchen. One of the adults gave me a little push and said, "I think you'd be really good at this." I really grew from the experience. Knowing how to gather a community to support a cause that people care about is really important, because nothing happens unless you do something about it.

Tammy: What do you think keeps LEFTY teens engaged in this dinner?

Alex: The temple has built such a deep relationship with MAZON over the past 40 years, raising almost a million dollars. We value the tradition and legacy. We have teens today whose parents participated in the MAZON Dinner as teens themselves. It's "L'dor v'dor-able" — the idea of "from generation to generation," our teens get to participate in a holy act from generations before them.

Tammy: Alex, you're also leading MAZON's first *Challah for Hunger* community chapter at the temple. What inspired you to start this program?



Alex: I love baking. During the pandemic, making challah became a way to express love and gratitude for my Jewish community. I thought, what a perfect *shidduch* (match). Who doesn't love baking? Who doesn't

love doing more things for MAZON? We're not just baking challah — we're combining it with anti-hunger advocacy, Jewish education, and the significance of challah and Shabbat in our tradition.



A Jewish Response To Hunger

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WHO IS MAZON?

Inspired by Jewish values and ideals, MAZON is a national advocacy organization working to end hunger among people of all faiths and backgrounds in the United States and Israel.

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