



PhilanthropyRoundtable

STRENGTHENING OUR FREE SOCIETY

AVI CHAI Foundation

Improving Jewish day school education and commitment to Jewish practice

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"And you shall teach them diligently to your children."

-Deuteronomy 11:19

Since 1994, the North American chapter of AVI CHAI Foundation has made Jewish day-school education its primary concern. And it pursues that mission with as much vigor and intensity as the foundation's benefactor, Zalman C. Bernstein, used to build his securities firm 30-odd years ago.

Bernstein endowed AVI CHAI (which means, "My father lives" in Hebrew) in 1984 and set it up with two branches: a North American branch, with offices on New York's Upper East Side, and an Israeli branch, with offices in Jerusalem. Each branch carries out a distinct mission. In Israel, the foundation works to improve relationships among Jews of different religious backgrounds. In North America, Jewish day schools are the focus. While each branch works within the legal framework of its host country, the foundation treats itself as a single unit, sharing the same corpus and board of trustees.

Yossi Prager, executive director of the North American branch, tells Philanthropy that until 50 years ago, there were very few Jewish day school students in America. Since then, enrollment nationwide has grown to roughly 200,000 students in some 800 day schools. "In the '90s alone," Prager says, "enrollment grew 20 percent to 25 percent."

But the challenges facing day schools are greater than creating class space—a problem faced by any number of schools—and differ in some interesting ways from those faced by charter schools, Catholic schools, and private secular schools. A good example is the problem of religious curriculum.

At Catholic schools, religious training typically averages a class a day. But in Jewish day schools, religious education is one-third to one-half of each school day. Despite its importance in the curriculum, however, there are no standards for delivering that education. Consequently, the quality of education varies greatly. In some schools, students are sight-reading Hebrew Bible passages as early as the third grade, a skill other schools won't develop until the middle school years, while in still other schools Jewish texts are only studied in translation. In an effort to bring consistency to Jewish religious learning, AVI CHAI is currently funding a project to develop standards in Bible teaching. The standards development is being carried out by Melton Research Center for Jewish Education at New York's Jewish Theological Seminary.

Among the 40 programs that AVI CHAI funds is one to enhance Jewish commitment. At the high school level, this involves grants that fund weekend retreats and promote Shabbat (Sabbath) observance. For the fourth through seventh grades, the foundation funds BabagaNewz, a publication that presents a view of contemporary life and problems as seen through a Jewish lens.

Trustee Driven

From the outset, Bernstein envisioned an active group of trustees. Every grant, no matter how small, is overseen by a staff member and a trustee. (AVI CHAI does not accept grant applications.) According to AVI CHAI, the "rich and varied backgrounds of our trustees [increase] the effectiveness of AVI CHAI's funding."

The trustees have also come to believe strongly in long-term funding. Instead of supporting programs for three or four years, then leaving them to stand on their own, AVI CHAI commits to long-term, multi-year support of the programs it creates and partners with. It's really the best way, according to the foundation, to assure that the goals of the

foundation's primary programs are met.

The commitment to long-term support, however, does not mean the foundation intends to exist in perpetuity. Bernstein's wish was for the foundation's corpus, currently at about \$475 million, to be spent down within the lifetimes of those who helped shaped the foundation's mission. Prager tells Philanthropy that 2027 is the date currently targeted for closing the foundation's doors. The problems of Jews 50 or 100 years out, Bernstein believed, are best addressed by philanthropists at that time.

By joining the Roundtable, AVI CHAI hopes to both give and take. "We want to learn from other donors," Prager says. At the same time, Prager hopes other donors can learn from AVI CHAI and the approaches it has taken to board governance and education reform.