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[Professors Jack Wertheimer, left, and Noam Pianko differ sharply on young Jews' outlook.](#)

Study presented at Jewish Funders Network finds little consensus on establishment values.

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Editor And Publisher

Phoenix — While conventional wisdom has it that American Jewry is suffering from a dearth of young leadership, the preliminary findings of a major report, to be published this summer by the Avi Chai Foundation, suggest otherwise.

Nonetheless, a number of tomorrow's leaders do not share traditional values regarding support for Israel, Jewish peoplehood, intermarriage and collective responsibility, which is worrisome to the study's sponsor.

Jack Wertheimer, a Jewish history professor at the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary and Avi Chai consultant who headed the six-person research team, told the annual Jewish Funders Network conference here on Monday that "we are blessed with talented, Jewishly serious and well-educated young leaders" in their 20s and 30s, thousands of whom 'are

sufficiently committed to Jewish life to invest of themselves — their time, energy, creativity — in leading their age peers.”

Based on interviews with 250 lay and professional leaders between the ages of 22 and 40, the report identified three basic categories, which Wertheimer described as the establishment-type “protective” group (defending Israel, sustaining Jewish communal institutions); and the less conventional “progressive” group (involved in start-ups and a variety of social justice causes) and “expressive” group (helping peers find personal meaning in being Jewish, often through literacy and learning).

He noted that the non-establishment progressive and expressive leaders “tend to be more open to criticism of Israeli policies, less supportive of Israeli advocacy efforts and less concerned with boundary issues such as intermarriage. Moreover, Jewish peoplehood for them means a celebration of diaspora cultures, including an implicit or explicit rejection of Israel’s centrality.”

The non-establishment leaders tend to be critical of the establishment organizations, and their values, Wertheimer said.

He asserted that establishment groups will need new strategies “to recruit and involve younger leaders, while retaining their agendas,” adding that the more open attitude of younger Jews to intermarried Jews “will further erode boundaries of Jewish life.”

“The coming challenge,” he concluded, “will be to find overarching causes and commonalities to bridge the fragmenting population of American Jews.”

But that premise was challenged sharply by Noam Pianko, a professor of Jewish history at the University of Washington, a respondent to Wertheimer’s presentation.

Noting that he was in the under-40 cohort, Pianko said that for his generation, “boundaries don’t match the moment” of 21st century America, which he described as “post-ethnic,” symbolized by President Barack Obama, whom he said represents racial fusion rather than division.

Pianko took exception to what he called the “value judgment” implicit in Wertheimer’s concerns about eroding boundaries and lack of centrality of Israel for young people.

“I think it hurts peoplehood to place Israel at the center of advocacy,” he asserted. “Let people decide on their own,” rather than raising issues of guilt and obligation, he said.

He said he was hearing from Wertheimer “older paradigms of what it means to be a committed Jew,” and asked if the community is “willing to face a radical, exciting moment of renaissance.”

Caught in the middle was Rabbi David Ellenson, president of the Reform movement’s Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, who acknowledged that “part of me is inclined to Noam’s excitement and part of me feels caught in older views.”

He said the community needs to think about a Judaism “not of boundaries but of meaning,” and the key question is whether innovations “will help bind people” to the historical Jewish narrative.”

The lively plenary was part of a three-day conference sponsored by the Jewish Funders Network, viewed as a yearly “summit” on Jewish philanthropy. About 250 people, representing more than 150 different philanthropists and foundations, from the well-known to the little-known, came together to meet, network, discuss possible collaboration and reflect on trends in giving.

Gone was the deep sense of gloom that hung like a pall over last year’s conference. Indeed, there was relatively little mention of the economic crisis or Madoff scandal of a year ago, and the consensus seemed to be that the financial, and philanthropic, situation is steadily improving, at least for those who attended the conference at the classy Arizona Biltmore Resort.

According to a report on an instantaneous survey taken on Sunday, the majority of funders present: are 40 to 60 years of age; live on the East Coast (46 percent); give between \$100,000 and \$500,000 in charity annually (11 percent give \$10 million or more and 14 percent give \$20 million or more); are somewhat optimistic that Jews will be better off in 2020; feel that literacy initiatives are insufficiently funded (68 percent); think that funding for Holocaust remembrance is sufficiently funded (52 percent); believe that Israel advocacy is under-funded (55 percent) and plan to increase their funding next year.

Mem Bernstein, trustee of the Avi Chai Foundation and chair of the conference, emphasized the importance of giving to Jewish causes, asserting that “service begins at home with Jews.”

She also noted that JFN President Mark Charendoff spoke last year of the imperative of collective responsibility.

It was a theme he returned to this year in his address, calling for funders to work together to “make the quantum leaps necessary to bring problems under control.”

He announced that two task forces would explore the issues of collaboration and the use of growth capital — “money that will allow healthy, young not-for-profits to reach their next stage.”

Charendoff also proposed what he called “the 51 percent solution,” based on the Talmudic concept that if the majority agrees on something, it becomes binding law for everyone.

He said that less than 25 percent of Jewish children attend a Jewish early childhood program, about 10 percent of the target population attends Jewish summer camps, and about 25 percent of young Jews go on Birthright Israel. If those percentages could reach 51 percent, with the collective help of funders, he said a tipping point could be reached that would have a profound impact.

Charendoff acknowledged that this would be difficult to achieve, “but if we are going to fail, that’s what I’d like to fail at,” he said.

Charendoff is credited widely for taking a small, progressive-oriented organization and expanding its membership and outlook.

As part of the organization's growth, he noted that the Israel office has completed its first full year of operation, and that an office has been opened in Los Angeles.

Leni Reiss contributed to this report.

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