



Avi Chai invests in people

By Jacob Berkman · May 19, 2008

NEW YORK (JTA) – The philanthropic trend toward investing in people rather than projects is getting a boost from one of America's largest Jewish foundations.

The Avi Chai Foundation, which has nearly \$700 million in assets, according to its last available tax filing, awarded \$1.15 million last week to six Jewish social entrepreneurs whom the foundation sees as emerging Jewish leaders.

Foundations typically fund specific programs and tend to keep a fairly close eye on how their money is used. But Avi Chai gave four individuals and one team of two \$75,000 per year over the next three years simply to create.

Though each recipient proposed a project to pursue, the foundation's leaders say Avi Chai will have very little oversight as to how each spends the money.

With these grants, the foundation is picking up on a giving model that seems to be taking root in the Jewish world. Other major foundations also have begun funding individuals in an effort to nurture creativity and sustain up-and-coming community leaders.

"We were looking for people who would be entrepreneurial or impactful in their ideas, who would think out of the box, or within the box in new ways," the executive director of the foundation, Yossi Prager, told JTA.

"All of these people have a project they are working on, but the investment was not because of their current project. We were really trying to invest in these people and get them started in their current dream to help them succeed now, so they can dream larger in the future."

The recipients are:

- * Ariel Beery and Aharon Horwitz, of New York and Jerusalem, who will split one grant to develop their Presentense Institute of Creative Zionism, which seeks to foster Jewish creativity by developing sites in major Jewish cities around the world where Jews can come, stay, work and collaborate.

- * Betsy Dolgin Katz, of Chicago, the North American director of the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School, to write a guide to adult Jewish education.

- * Rabbi Elie Kaunfer of New York, the co-founder and executive director of Mechon Hadar, a network of grass-roots egalitarian and traditional minyanim, to further develop the group's full-time yeshiva for adults.

- * Rabbi Dov Linzer, the dean of the progressive Orthodox seminary Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in New York, to create a rabbinical school curriculum for rabbis who will become educators rather than pulpit rabbis.

- * Rabbi Menachem Schmidt, the head of the Chabad house at the University of Pennsylvania, to develop Shabbat programming at a downtown art gallery in Philadelphia.

Avi Chai, whose mission is to create Jewish literacy and peoplehood, traditionally funds Jewish day schools, summer camps, educational curricula and other supporting programs.

But the foundation is taking a new approach through these grants. It calls them Avi Chai Fellowships to emphasize that they are not creating institutions, but a legacy of Jewish leaders, the foundation's chairman Arthur Fried, said last week at the Avi Chai offices in a mansion on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

The foundation plans to spend all of its assets by 2020. Fried says it is taking a chance on a new strategy.

"We want to set a tone for other foundations and other philanthropists," he said.

But some Jewish foundations already have caught on.

Among others, the Harold Grinspoon Foundation recently awarded a \$200,000 incubator grant to Kaunfer's partner at Hadar, Rabbi Ethan Tucker, to help him grow projects to engage Jews from various streams of Judaism. That money was given directly to Tucker to spend however he pleased.

The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Family Philanthropies and Brandeis University recently awarded a two-year visiting professorship at the Massachusetts school, replete with a book deal and a six-figure salary, to Yehuda Kurtzer to help him write a Jewish book that Brandeis and Bronfman hope will transform the way Jews think about themselves.

Such grants tend to give innovators more room to create by giving them more financial leeway – a boon especially for those who run fledgling organizations, according to Joanna Ballantine, the executive director of the Grinspoon Foundation.

"The advantage of our fellowship is that now Ethan is able to devote himself to his thinking and writing and teaching. It liberates him from holding a 9-to-5 job," she said. "He shouldn't have to fund-raise and seek speaking engagements to pay his rent."

Though they may not be the first to use the model, Avi Chai's grants are the most extensive to date. The foundation says it will award at least two more rounds of grants, giving away more than \$3 million in total. Fried also indicated the grants would continue until the foundation closes down in 2020.

Prager says the foundation doesn't expect all the money to pay dividends; officials assume many will not. But he says they are a necessary investment.

"There are people here who recognized that many people sitting around decision-making tables are of an older generation that already has decades of experience in Jewish communal life, but our future depends on enabling younger people who share the same values to experiment," Prager said. "Sometimes they will fail and sometimes they will thrive."

"But we are interested in enabling them. We are looking at them as partners and ultimately successors."