



PhilanthropyRoundtable

STRENGTHENING OUR FREE SOCIETY

### Jewish Giving

Keep the Faith Alive

Yossi Prager

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The first challenge in evaluating Jewish philanthropy is to define the subject at hand: Do we mean giving by Jews or giving from a Jewish perspective? The primary problem with contemporary Jewish philanthropy may be that not enough of it stems from a Jewish worldview.

Two studies, both conducted in recent years but with different methodologies, show that Jewish philanthropists contribute the overwhelming majority of their dollars to universal, rather than Jewish, organizations and causes. In 1998, professor Jack Wertheimer studied the 232 foundations in America that self-identified as giving at least \$200,000 to Jewish causes. He found that even these foundations gave nearly two-thirds of their annual funding, \$487 million, to non-sectarian causes. Similarly, a 2003 report by Dr. Gary Tobin and colleagues at the Institute for Jewish and Community Research examined the 865 philanthropic gifts of \$10 million or more made by all American donors between 1995 and 2000. While nearly 25 percent (188 gifts totaling \$5.3 billion) were made by Jews, the Jewish mega-givers made fewer than 10 percent of their gifts to Jewish or Israeli organizations. While these two studies do not represent the full panoply of Jewish giving, most of which is by individuals giving much less than \$10 million, it seems likely that the data capture the overall thrust of giving by Jews.

No one suggests that Jewish giving should be limited to sectarian causes. Judaism is broadly conceived, premised on the notion that people can be God's partners in shaping a world in which power is obtained and employed to seek justice and protect the weak. When God brought His fledgling people to Mount Sinai, He revealed a comprehensive legal system, covering Jewish national governance, interpersonal relations (including civil law), and individual relationships with the divine. The scope of Jewish concern covers all activities that advance the interests of humanity as perceived through the Jewish moral lens.

Still, the broad scope of Judaism does not convert all philanthropy into Jewish philanthropy. Donors drawing on a Jewish worldview will prioritize their giving in ways that reflect Jewish ideas and values, and they will also contribute significantly to Jewish education, which is the engine that drives the continuity of Judaism.

#### Jewish Giving to Universal Causes

Given the integration, even assimilation, of most Jews into American society, it is not surprising that Jewish giving generally mirrors non-Jewish giving. In Dr. Tobin's study, Jewish mega-givers gave marginally more than their non-Jewish peers to higher education and significantly more to arts and culture, but the overall patterns of Jewish and non-Jewish giving were similar. Few Jewish philanthropists have had the benefits of an intensive Jewish education that might give their philanthropy a more distinctively Jewish sensibility.

How would giving to universal causes be different if it were an expression of a Jewish worldview? First, the philanthropic priorities might change a bit. Some of the resources now being invested in arts, culture, and elite higher education would be rerouted to address poverty, education for the masses (especially job training programs), medical research, and other causes that will improve the lives of the most disadvantaged among us.

Equally important, the thinking behind the giving would draw more from Jewish tradition. While money is a necessary ingredient for addressing most of the challenges faced by our society, solutions ultimately stem from ideas. Judaism is rich in ideas and experience that are useful to philanthropists. Because Judaism is a religion built on law (even ethical requirements such as charity are governed by Jewish law) Jewish scholars have generated a millennia-long string of legal precedents that are essentially an untapped resource for Jewish philanthropists.

For example, in recent decades both government and private philanthropy have tried varying approaches to solving the

problem of poverty in America, often struggling to find ways of giving without generating dependence. From long ago, a primary goal of Jewish charity law was bringing the needy to self-sufficiency. Thus, Jewish law places the highest priority upon providing jobs to the poor and denies support to those who refuse to work. In a host of other ways, Jewish charity and civil law seek to protect the disadvantaged from neglect and exploitation while building up charity recipients' sense of responsibility and self-respect.

Jewish law and thought have addressed a diverse array of additional social problems that now engage philanthropists and public policy thinkers. Jewish philanthropists should draw on these sources as they craft programmatic solutions to contemporary issues.

### Understanding the Middle East

Given the challenges currently facing America, Jewish philanthropy should have another distinctive feature as it addresses universal issues. While the War Against Terror currently being waged by the United States and its allies is a military and police operation, it also has an informational component. In order to win this war, we must understand the nature of the enemy we face and the internal reasons driving fundamentalist Islam to attack us. Colleges and universities can play an important role in helping students as well as the broader community to understand the issues involved. Unfortunately, departments of Middle East studies often focus narrowly on issues relating to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and many primarily teach theories that blame the West, particularly America and Israel, for Arab grievances. In recent years, a few Jewish philanthropists have begun to respond energetically to the war of ideas against Israel by providing funding for both academic and extracurricular programs that present a more balanced picture of Israel, its achievements, and its challenges. But the modest efforts to date have done little to change the overall thrust of the Middle East departments.

Having gained some experience with the situation on campus, Jewish philanthropists should now join with other interested funders first to systematically and rigorously examine the Middle East departments at American universities in order to ascertain the breadth and balance of the education provided. Then, as needed, this coalition of philanthropists should work to expand the Middle East departments to ensure that the scholarship and leadership produced by these departments provide America with the range of information and perspectives needed for the twenty-first century. This philanthropic effort will take persistence and courage against opponents who argue that any attempt to influence the campus classroom is an un-American attack on free speech. The Jewish community has shown its spine against these arguments in the past few years, and there is reason to hope that a coalition of philanthropists, Jewish and non-Jewish, will ultimately succeed.

### Revitalizing Jewish Education

As we noted earlier, only a small proportion of Jewish philanthropy currently flows to Jewish causes. Since nearly half of even this limited amount is sent abroad (much of it to Israel), the resources available for Jewish needs in America are minimal. If Jews today were more literate in their own traditions and more successful in transmitting Judaism to future generations, then the meagerness of charitable contributions for Jewish religious life, especially Jewish education, would not matter as much. Sadly, the needs dramatically exceed the available funding.

Consider the recent history of Jews in America. Most American Jews are descendants of immigrants who reached these shores between 1880 and 1940. Arriving with little but the clothing on their backs and with limited command of English, these immigrants set about successfully assimilating into American life. From an educational, professional, and economic perspective, Jews have succeeded to an extraordinary degree. But success came at a price.

In their efforts to assimilate, many Jewish immigrants let go of their distinctive language and religious traditions, forsaking not just the Sabbath and kosher food but also serious Jewish education for their children. The result, now that we have third- and fourth-generation Americans from these immigrant families, is a Jewish community that consists of an inner core that is Jewishly knowledgeable and observant, while the majority of American Jews, though proud of their Judaism, are deeply ignorant, unable to read Jewish texts in their original Hebrew or articulate the distinctive contribution that Judaism offers to the world. The People of the Book have forgotten their Book.

If the Jewish civilization remains important to Jews and to the larger world, then Jewish literacy should become a greater priority. Fortunately, there is evidence that at the grass roots level more American Jews are showing interest. Jewish day schools, summer camps, Israel trips, youth groups, and adult education programs are all growing, if slowly. The enrollment trajectory is more problematic in the afternoon or Sunday school programs, which still provide the limited Jewish education that most American Jewish children receive, but there are pockets of energy and programmatic improvement in these schools, too. All told, the costs of the Jewish educational system are estimated at over \$3 billion

annually (mostly raised through tuition fees), and more will be needed to enhance the system to ensure that the offerings are both appealing and affordable.

Jewish philanthropy should re-prioritize, putting much greater resources and energy into Jewish education. While there are enclaves of high-quality Jewish educational programs, it will take a massive infusion of energy, talent, and money to transform the existing system into a network of first-rate educational institutions. The needs include updating the goals and curricula of the programs, ensuring a flow of well-trained leaders and faculty, and bringing costs to affordable levels. Small examples of progress in each area already exist.

Transforming Jewish education in America will not be easy, given the large numbers of Jews who currently opt out of the Jewish educational system. Yet with adequate resources and determination, the objectives are reachable.

The great Talmudic sage Hillel said nearly 2,000 years ago, "If I am not for myself, who will be? And if I am only for myself, what am I?" In these early years of the twenty-first century, this epigram captures the challenges of Jewish philanthropy. (As an ethical teaching, it is also an excellent lesson for people of all faiths.) Jews should draw on the teachings of Judaism to protect the disadvantaged in American society. But Jewish philanthropists investing from a Jewish perspective will also work to ensure that future generations of Jews will be committed to their own traditions and texts. Ultimately, Judaism's ability to make a continuing contribution to the world depends on it.

Yossi Prager ([yprager@avichaina.org](mailto:yprager@avichaina.org)) is executive director for North America of the AVI CHAI Foundation.