



Presentation to the Jim Joseph Foundation

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Introduction

The blessings and challenges of selecting a strategic approach for a philanthropic foundation reflects the unique opportunity to balance the vision and dreams of the donor with the passion and intelligence of scanning the environment to seek out those niches where a transformational difference is possible. As stated by Harvard Professor, Michael Porter, “Strategy is about being different. It means deliberately choosing a different set of activities to deliver a unique set of value.”

In evaluating where the Jim Joseph Foundation (JJF) can truly make a difference, this paper recommends a multi-faceted “balanced portfolio.” The Foundation should dedicate substantial resources to meeting the central challenge facing the American Jewish community today by becoming a “Pathfinder” and bearing the burden of risk by finding and supporting educational vehicles that can be adapted to the current demands of young Jews between 18 to 30 years of age. The historical and traditional approaches do not resonate for many reasons including their institutional base, conceptual frameworks in the context of a highly competitive environment for “brain share”, and their lack of understanding the marketplace. Only bold action can create the scale necessary to have great impact. Too often, consensus-driven incremental steps have led to marginal changes. The fields of Jewish education and leadership deserve more.

The Challenge

We are living in a time of change within change within change – in terms of how people relate to meaning, to their identities, to community in general and to the Jewish community in particular. Technologies such as the iPod, Tivo and YouTube combine to make the individual sovereign. Life has been customized to the individual, especially among the young. Vast social and professional networks such as MySpace, Moveon, and Facebook thrive while most traditional institutions grapple with apparent lack of interest. At the same time, diversity is changing the face of the United States, with California becoming the first American state to have a white minority.

Against this complicated backdrop, the Jewish community has wrestled with its own future since the shocking statistics of the 1991 National Jewish Population Study triggered a widespread “continuity” debate. This debate, whether couched as Renewal or Renaissance made a large bet on one strategy: Strengthening the center, and hoping that the margins will follow. Studies of the community today reveal that this has the unintended effect of building a Jewish community of leaders with no followers, or “Rebbs with no Hassids”¹ In short, the margins have become the new mainstream, and the committed mainstream the margins.

If we are to ensure that the leaders, movements, and central organizations of the Jewish community do not become detached from the majority of Jews in general, and young Jews in particular, we must

¹ Sherry Israel, “American Jewish Public Activity – Identity, Demography, and Institutional Change” in *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints*, September 2001.

perform a philanthropic “Copernican twist” which places the new mainstream in the center. This is a complicated challenge demanding an ability to innovate that no single institution possesses. Even our most valuable institutions lack the resources, analysis, freedom from consensus planning, and critically, the permission to experiment and fail, and learn from that failure. Only the Foundation sector has this ability to bear the risk and support the field. The best of Foundation history is defined by the willingness of leadership foundations to “anoint themselves” and take on issues and approaches that consensus driven organizational and governmental entities choose to bypass.

Defining an Audience

Strategic Philanthropy devoted to this issue demands the definition of a precise target audience, and the ability to develop a nuanced understanding of how that audience encounters their identity and forms community today. We believe that the focus must be on Jews aged 18-30 for several reasons. First, this is a critical stage of identity formulation, especially post-college where an individual makes most of their life decisions of job, social network, partner, and domicile, that will define them henceforth. Second, this age group is a “blind spot” in our Jewish communal infrastructure. While much of Jewish life is “supply driven,” that is, driven by the plethora of organizational responses, this age group is demand driven, seeking to explore with no natural places to go. The group has aged out of the educational and camping system and the majority are not engaged in our institutional framework. Even Hillel engages only 25% of eligible students...and most of these only episodically. Most young Jews are truly “wandering” at this critical time. There is little that exists to meaningfully engage younger Jews in the ways that they themselves engage – peer to peer, as individuals outside of institutional frameworks, through loose networks, reinforced by culture and personal experience.

Closer research of this cohort allows us to construct target audiences that go beyond the “affiliated” and the “unaffiliated.” Recently, *OMG! How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era*² by Anna Greenberg identified that although 14% of Jews found religion and Jewish community to be an important part of their life, a large plurality of young Jews, 47%, (a number that was abnormally high compared to their non-Jewish peers) were “Undecided,” “uncertain yet positive about their Judaism leaning towards the informal and expressive practice as opposed to the formal and institutional.”

Why does this huge Undecided category exist? I would posit there are three specifically Jewish reasons for the rapid evolution of identity for this target audience:

First, **we are living at a time when for most Jews, being Jewish is a choice.** Gone are the days when communal pressures, both internal and external, could keep people Jewishly identified. The boundaries of American society are more porous, with younger Jews situated comfortably in the universal world and thus having to actively decide if and when to opt into their Jewishness. Second, **identity has become more complex.** For any individual, Jewishness can be only one of many identities – one element that shares space with their gender, class, race, sexual orientation, nationality, etc. And finally, **the two major issues that previously galvanized the community – the Holocaust and Israel – no longer have the same resonance for this generation.** The community’s continued focus on the Holocaust and anti-Semitism have for many young Jews led to a perception that being Jewish is more about victimhood than self-confidence and meaning; so ego dystonic when measured against the rest of their life experiences.

In addition, young Jews have been impacted by three complicated changes that have affected all young Americans irrespective of their religion or ethnicity:

² Anna Greenberg, *OMG! How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era* 2005

First, this generation **develops networks that are remarkably socially diverse**. Greenberg states that only 7% report that all their friends are the same religion as themselves. Jews no longer live, work and socialize only with other Jews. Just as Catholics no longer live around the Parish Church, young Jews no longer share a community based upon living in a shared physical space like Fairfax, Forest Hills or Skokie.

Second, young Jews, like all Americans, are **experiencing an extended adolescence by lengthening the period between college graduation and marriage (now 11 years) which further impacts their very notion of community**. Rather than settle down into traditional families, the writer Ethan Watters in his book *Urban Tribes* sets out the phenomenon of his friends' eclectic and intricate community of young people who live and work together in various combinations, form regular rituals, and provide the support of an extended family, irrespective of religious background. He describes a scenario across the country, in which these tight-knit groups of friends have replaced organizational life and married life.

And finally, **their confidence and trust in institutional life has declined**. According to academics such as Robert Putnam and Robert Wuthnow, "what it means to be involved in one's community has been changing dramatically during the past half-century."³ In the past, civic engagement was about joining traditional highly structured institutional organizations and clubs (eg. Rotary Club, United Way, Hadassah or B'nai Brith) where loyalty and membership was central and about being a "good neighbor" in their often homogenous neighborhood. By the 1990's with people's time more limited, interests more specialized, and geographic loyalties less assured, involvement came to be defined less by membership than by effectiveness. Their motivation was no longer driven by obligation and responsibility, but by "meaning" (perceived return on time invested.) Rather than simply participate in one community, individuals now engage in several ever shifting niche "networks" that are decentralized, less formal and most often de-institutionalized (i.e. book groups, support groups, alumni and professional associations, intermittent volunteering, etc.). They participate as long as it is clear to them what they are getting back in return for their involvement. If not, they will use their time elsewhere.

Defining the Opportunity

As a counterpoint to the challenges set out above – there is much to feel positive about. Despite the diversely integrated social networks experienced by Generation Y Jews, Greenberg finds that they feel "incredibly self confident about their Jewish identities. In contrast to the continuity debates of the 1990's Generation Y Jews are very positive about being Jewish... (Although they) struggle to define a meaningful concept of community in general they feel tied to a global Jewish community."⁴ The biggest challenge according to Greenberg's focus groups is the disturbing finding that the majority of Generation Y Jews are ignorant of most Jewish organizations' existence. "When asked to identify AIPAC, the UJC and the AJC they neither know what the letters stand for nor understand how to differentiate one organization from another. Institutional life appears virtually irrelevant to those in this study. The few who have experiences with Jewish institutions are often left with negative impressions."⁵

Sociologist Sherry Israel attributes this to what she has coined "An Organizational Disconnect." There is "a mismatch between the needs and perceptions of most Jews and the basic assumptions and

³ Robert Wuthnow, *Loose Connections: Joining Together in America's Fragmented Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2000)

⁴ Anna Greenberg, *Grande Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon, No Foam... Jewish Identity in a Time of Unlimited Choices* 2006

⁵ Anna Greenberg, *Latte Report* page 8.

programs of most of the communally-based American Jewish organizations.”⁶ In short, while there is clearly a hunger, or demand, for Jewish meaning, there is little being supplied by a communal infrastructure. To be fair, it should be noted that the Jewish community is not alone in this predicament. One only need reflect upon how powerful sectors including the music, political, and television industries are being turned on their head by these powerful changes in identity and community. However, the Jewish communal organization with its consensus driven decision making mechanism is particularly unsuited to fathoming its way through these complexities. Their best efforts amount to what brand manager Scott Bedbury calls their Jewish “combover”—desperate attempts to manufacture “hip” imagery and language to compensate for meaning and connection, something they lost long ago.”⁷ The greatest change strategy a Foundation can adopt is to focus on making change by aiding traditional Jewish communal organizations to meet this identity challenge and adapt to this demand driven reality.

Such an undertaking follows in the footsteps of an authentically Jewish process of change. In his analysis of American Jewish history, Jonathan Sarna argues that generational change has historically been our strength and our reality.⁸ “Jewish history has been one of constant challenge and response.” Writes Sarna, “New historical conditions create new movements, new emphases, and new paradigms – the very opposite of the tried and true.”

Recommendations

How can our institutional infrastructure adapt to transmit the Jewish identity, values, heritage, and ritual that young Jews are demanding but we are not supplying? I believe that the answer lies in the spirit of Jonathan Sarna, and recommend that the JJF focus on supporting a range of projects that can seed change institutionally and de-institutionally, with the Foundation acting as pathfinder – a catalyst, a risk bearer, and a leading evaluator and communicator of what works, what does not, and what could. Such a path has the potential to ensure that Jewish identity, community, and meaning are translated to satisfy the hunger of the next generations.

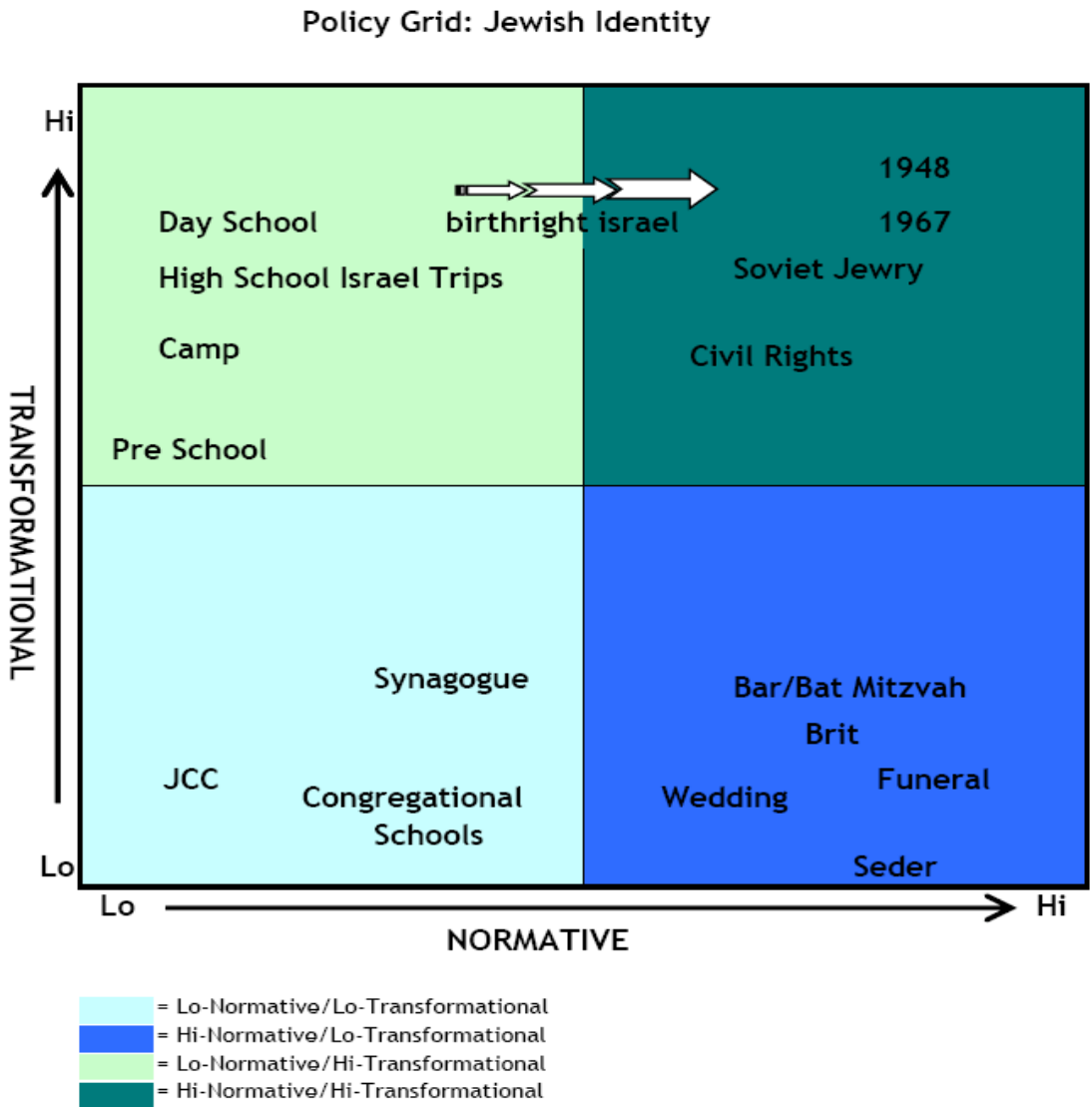
In approaching this challenge, the JJF could draw strength from projects such as the Steinhardt and Bronfman’s approach to the birthright israel program which has experimented with the social networks involved in Jewish life on a mass scale (with the result of 80% of the target market applying for or going on birthright trips along with the concomitant positive impact on 91% of the individual participants; The Schusterman Family Foundation’s reinvigoration of BBYO which has experimented with the technologies used to disseminate Jewish meaning and create connectivity; American Jewish World Service and now the Jewish Funds for Justice and their efforts to refine their core mission and create new messages that engage young Jews; and Reboot, supported initially by Righteous Persons Foundation and The Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies and its experiments with new role models and new contemporary Jewish content and distribution systems.

⁶ Sherry Israel, “American Jewish Public Activity – Identity, Demography, and Institutional Change” in *Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints*, September 2001.

⁷ Scott Bedbury, *A New Brand World* (New York, NY: Viking, 2002)

⁸ Jonathan Sarna, “*A Great Awakening: The Transformation that Shaped Twentieth Century American Judaism and its Implications for Today*” CIJE Essay Series, 1995.

I have found a conceptual framework first designed by Danny Krifcher to be a constructive way to analyze possible approaches, as it emphasizes projects with high impact and great reach.



Essentially, this grid demonstrates that normative behaviors (such as life cycle events) have little transformative impact. Many institutions (JCCs, Synagogues) neither transform nor attract the majority of American Jews on an ongoing basis. Transformative programs (day schools, high school Israel trips, Jewish camps) are truly transformative; however, they are not normative. The sweet spot (until now) of normative/transformative events were externally driven: 1948, 1967, Soviet Jewry (and for many, the American civil rights movement). birthright israel is about to become the first internally generated program that moves into the grid's sweet spot.

Developing a Pathfinder approach necessitates, above all, a **Balanced Giving Portfolio**, spreading risk across a spectrum of programs from the deeply institutional to the more experimental, and

evaluating and networking all. As to the core question asked by JJF, I would present the following initial thoughts:

- 5% for Research, program evaluation and performance improvement support;
- 4% for capacity building support to innovators in the field;
- 1% for good Foundation citizenship (Membership and grants to Council on Foundations, Jewish Funders Network, Independent Sector, etc)
- 10% for venture philanthropy (with expectations of substantial “noble failure;”)
- 10% for good San Francisco Jewish citizenship, including Trustee and Executive discretionary funds;
- 10% for traditional Jewish education national initiatives (PEJE, National Foundation for Jewish Camping, etc.)
- 10% for birthright israel (in light of its target audience and unmet needs)
- 50% for unique strategic”Pathfinder” interventions;

While the first items are self-explanatory, some illustrations of these strategic scale-driven “Pathfinder” ideas merit review:

*With almost half of American college students coming from households with only one Jewish parent, the current Hillel organizing model may need major revision. Recent research at New York University identifies the problem of the Hillel core being religiously observant students who create an unwelcoming environment, driving many of the “new mainstream” students away. Imagine a new organizing model experiment whereby the observant students are given space and support outside of the Hillel organizational framework. New mainstream students can be attracted to community involvement by exploiting their interest in birthright (simply because of its 80% market penetration) and by customizing pre-trip, trip and post-trip activities to the campus. Ongoing programming, including volunteer-service programs, social justice, Jewish art and film and other doorways for connections can be exploded.

*Many college graduates are not certain as to the nature and confidence of their career choices, especially as maturing is extended in contemporary life. Imagine a demand-centered service center which connected these young adults with volunteer (and/or subsidized volunteer) positions in Jewish life domestically, in Israel and around the world. Too often, highly motivated young people would like to do this, but find that they don’t fit into the boxes presented in existing programs (i.e., cleaning and support work for the Israeli Defense Forces via Mahal 2000, continued formal education via MASA, etc.) Knowing that we are dealing with the Ipod, Tivo generation, we could be far more creative in making this continued connection, through the development of a Jewish “concierge” service, engaging young adults through their areas of interest and helping facilitate their involvement, education and interests.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the trustees of the Foundation are faced with the challenge of deciding between right and right, not right and wrong. This awesome responsibility necessitates the weighing of the safe versus the risky; young children versus teens versus adults. It calls for the confluence of the soul of the Foundation with a wise business plan. I urge that you reflect on these opportunities with a mindset of open exploration and knowledge, in the words of Michael Hammer, that “you can’t improve what you can’t measure.” The greatest challenge you face is avoiding the creation of a culture of comfort; the foundation disease that breeds arrogance and self-satisfaction. Know that you have the power to change the world...and go forth boldly to do so, with the continuous striving for excellence and seriousness that your sacred mission requires.