

American Jewish Press Association
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Panel Presentation: How Jewish Foundations Are Changing Our World

The Jim Joseph Foundation is one of burgeoning number of Jewish private and Federation supporting organizations that recently have banked literally billions of philanthropic dollars. JJF, established in 2006 as a California public benefit corporation, is devoted exclusively to supporting education of Jewish children, youth, and young adults in the United States. JJF estimates that effective 2008 it will grant approximately 30 million dollars annually.

JJF investment of its philanthropic resources ideally will make an indelible impact on Jewish youth in the United States. In the coming years, working with funding partners; iconic and we suspect emerging institutions in the Jewish community; organizations; and educators, JJF hopes to be able to demonstrate that increasing numbers of young Jews engage in ongoing Jewish learning and choose to live vibrant Jewish lives.

Clearly, the nature of Jewish communal life in contemporary America is dynamic. Judaism is no longer a condition but a choice. Community as we once understood it has changed, particularly for younger Jews. As Steve Windmueller, Dean of Hebrew Union College in LA, aptly notes:

“This must be understood as a revolution of generations as x’ers and y’ers are defining ‘community’ around a different set of parameters. ‘Sovereign self’ has replaced the ‘collective good,’ just as an entrepreneurial approach to institution building has supplanted federation’s traditional crisis-based model and the umbrella framework for charitable giving.”

Windmueller suggests further that “this revolution encompasses new uses of language, advanced technologies, and different modalities of organizing. If the established communal model was understood to be an integrated, multi-agenda approach to collective problem-solving, the emerging framework is highly

diffuse and driven by single-issue constituencies, with a market approach that can be described as segmented rather than holistic. Today, the emergence of many new institutional models is reflective of these social changes, in part driven by the new philanthropic impetus to reconfigure the communal enterprise.”

I have written on these trends and their implications for the traditional, organized Jewish community. Basically, I assert that if Federations continue to resist re-engineering their work to focus on results and effectiveness that they will become increasingly isolated not only from Jewish mega-funders but young Jewish philanthropists as well, whose Judaism is a journey and not an article of faith. The shift in the field toward performance oriented philanthropy necessitates that Federations complement their relentless pursuit of resources with an equally stout, sophisticated focus on results achieved with the funds they so generously grant.

There is a story to be told here, and I wish the Jewish Press would feature articles on trends and tensions in Jewish philanthropy. Certainly, this is an historic moment in American Jewish philanthropy as is quickly becoming the case in the Israeli independent sector as well.

These concerns and my criticisms notwithstanding, we should never underestimate the remarkable fundraising federations do annually nor the system’s very significant resource development. San Francisco is one exceptional example of this fundraising prowess, with its Federation donor advised and supporting foundation assets growing in just two decades from 12 million dollars to a staggering 2.8 billion dollars.

Wealth abounds in the American Jewish community. Its influx into the independent sector is changing Jewish philanthropic enterprise. In brief, new models for directing charitable dollars to community - not necessarily grounded in principals of consensus decision making nor distributed from centralized sources of pooled capital – challenge the long standing *Kehilla* approach to philanthropy. This democratization of Jewish philanthropy brings with it more colorful and occasionally controversial *tzedakah*, carried out

by the *Parnassim*. These *Parnassim* are wealthy lay leaders whose affluence confers on them extraordinary privilege and power (Windmueller).

Nearly weekly in the Chronicle of Philanthropy readers see contributions of millions of dollars from Jewish donors to universities, hospitals, museums, symphonic orchestras, public education, and causes as diverse as the environment and micro enterprise loan programs in third world countries. Often you will find, however, contrary to conventional wisdom, that these very same donors are major funders of Federation annual as well as special campaigns. In fact, a crucial point I want to make for the purpose of further discussion is that the persistent juxtaposition of private philanthropy as purely competitive with Federation philanthropy is misleading at best and factually inaccurate if held to any test of empirical validation.

Obviously, I am neither a journalist nor the typical reader of Jewish weeklies. But I believe looking at the Jewish world from the perspective of both/and—and not either/or—makes for good press. Jewish journalists should interview those who, in accordance with our revered traditions, see abundance in the universe. Profile funders who straddle the organized communal and private foundation worlds and whose good work helps to not only improve Jewish lives but contribute to sustained efforts to ameliorate undesirable social conditions. Tell the human interest stories of the beneficiaries of these philanthropists' investments, linking one Jew to another in a chain of *amcha*.

I postulate that what best serves our shared interest to keep Jewish community strong is to step back from the rhetoric of the mega rich, the defensive retorts of Federation leadership, and occasional simplistic pronouncements of the press to instead portray contemporary Jewish philanthropy in its full complexity. This mosaic is one of diversity and dialectic. Boutique and even radically individualized philanthropy are every bit as much complementary of institutional philanthropy as they are a challenge to it. Think... birthright Israel; the growth of Jewish day schools; the creation of the Partnership for Excellence in Jewish Education; the emergence of the Foundation for Jewish Camping; Wexner adult education programs; PJ Library...all these are representative of initiatives among many

more I could site that conjoin, for mutual gain, private and federation philanthropy.

I do not dispute that certain activist Jewish philanthropists will periodically express in the most public of forums a seeming reluctance to endorse Federation philanthropy. For example, just a few weeks ago, the conspicuously wealthy Ronnie Heyman pronounced in the (May 31st) Chronicle of Philanthropy her unwillingness to endow family Federation annual gift, remarking that, “How do I know what the future leadership of UJA will be? I’m much better off leaving my children the discretion to do this.” Heyman added: “They will do the right thing.”

So, it is true that we have contrasting views and occasional discordant voices in the field of Jewish philanthropy. And there is pressure on Federations because of their obstinance in acting more foundation like at the very time when “the field of philanthropy is undergoing a fundamental transition to a more performance centered approach that provides foundations and their grantees with current information and actionable insights” (to quote Mark Kramer in the newly released From Insights to Action: New Directions in Foundation Evaluation).

But let us not lose sight of the fact that federations are, strictly speaking, not foundations. They are fundraising organizations which build, protect, and preserve local communal assets...thank G_d. Federations’ decades of doing good with donor dollars in neighborhoods, cities, and communities that federation members see and touch and in which they reside will continue to attract significant financial support.

Meanwhile, the proliferation of new foundations will accelerate the privatizing of philanthropy. Privatization means in this instance, I think energy, diversification, and innovation even while it causes, paradoxically, inefficiencies (funders “making their own shabbos,” as it were, at the expense of directing much sought after support for existing institutions and proven programs).

In this week’s parsha in Numbers, Balak, we learn (according to San Francisco Temple Emanuel Scholar-in-Residence Rabbi Larry

Kushner's interpretation) of "the folly of a human ego self-destructively preoccupied with its own agenda instead of discerning God's own." The Jim Joseph Foundation, by charter, was established to exist in perpetuity. During the next decade, JJF conceivably could grant in excess of 300 million dollars, all of it granted to nourish the education of Jewish youth in the United States. JJF intends to act with humility, curiosity, and mindfulness as it strives to discern the most promising funding opportunities a robust contemporary American Jewish education landscape presents to us. I hope chronicling this story—or one of dozens if not hundreds like it—creates engaging press for you and the readers of the 200 Jewish newspapers represented in AJPA. _____

Thank you.