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Chip Edelsberg addressing the Los Angeles Bureau of Education Community Leaders/Funders

As community leaders and funders, you represent that part of the community which is most connected, constantly caring, and consistently generous. Individuals, couples and families – you are most responsible for ensuring the vitality of Jewish education today. It is your attention and time as well as *tzedakah* on which we count for stewardship of the Jewish future in the United States. I commend and congratulate you for your dedication.

In sharing a personal story with you this evening, I hope to give you insight from the inside out into how and why I view the Jewish world as I do, as well as to describe how that view intersects with the philanthropic work the Jim Joseph Foundation will undertake.

I was raised in a classically Reform Jewish family in Cleveland, Ohio. I could tell you endearing stories about my parents and immigrant grandparents – you know, tales of remarkable journeys and seemingly insurmountable obstacles overcome; of garment workers and shoe cobblers working ungodly hours to support their families who lived in houses redolent with pungent smell of bubbe's

endless cooking; of tight-knit Jewish neighborhoods anchored by the Jewish Alliance (JCC) in areas of the city that are now desperate and forlorn. You get the picture, of course, so I don't have to repeat the story.

What I do want to share with you are a couple of peak experiences that stand out as formative in my Jewish upbringing. I belonged to a large Reform congregation, Fairmont Temple. Like its counterpart in Cleveland – Temple-Tifereth Israel – Fairmont had a history of distinguished, powerful rabbis. Tifereth Israel was the home of the legendary Abba Hillel Silver, America's most ardent and articulate Zionist in his time. His counterpart at Fairmont Temple, Rabbi Balfour Brickner, was a significant figure in his own right, eventually succeeded in that pulpit by Rabbi Arthur J. Lelyveld. Lelyveld became the leading social activist Reform rabbi in the country. He was a diminutive man with a fiery shock of carrot-colored hair, a booming voice, and a towering intellect. On the pulpit, he was majestic. In the small chapel, we as teens were awed by him.

I recall vividly sitting in Rabbi Lelyveld's office, a catacomb overflowing with books and papers and pictures of the Rabbi with public officials, famous journalists, and giants in corporate America.

You can imagine why, at age 13, I quaked when Arthur J. stated to me and my Dad, emphatically and definitively – “No, we don’t allow Bar-Mitzvah boys at Fairmont Temple to wear *tallit*”. To which my Dad, resolute, respectful, but staunchly certain in his own stead, responded intransigently, “Then Chip won’t become a Bar Mitzvah in this congregation.”

The Rabbi lost that tussle with my Dad. He relented, ultimately, graciously allowing me to wear Grandpa Ben’s treasured *tallit* as the first Fairmont Bar Mitzvah ever to be so adorned. Nearly a decade later, recalling the Rabbi’s impressive office, admiring his by then very public record of social action, and most vividly remembering the way in which he accommodated my father’s ultimatum, I asked Rabbi Lelyveld to become an advisor for an undergraduate honor’s thesis that I was writing on American Jewish fiction. Rabbi Lelyveld accepted the invitation, to my surprise.

Twice a month, I’d drive (somewhat nervously) up from Columbus to Cleveland to sit in the Rabbi’s magnificent study. I soaked up every insight I could glean from Rabbi Lelyveld on the works of Bellow, Malamud, the Roths (Phillip and Henry), Isaac Bashevis Singer. I also probed his reading of novels offered by those

with a more alienated Jewish self, such as Norman Mailer and Nathaniel West, whose writing I was determined to include in my thesis as part of the canon of American Jewish fiction.

I carried away from my interactions with the Rabbi Lelyveld a profound appreciation for the life of the mind. I learned to treat authority with respect but not to acquiesce obsequiously to it. At some unconscious level, the salient lesson Rabbi Lelyveld taught me was that learning the Torah was one thing, living Torah another – the latter it turns out a more suitable calling for me.

Well, amazingly enough, I now find myself in the enviable position of influencing the grant making of a Board which has inherited the mighty responsibility of granting tens of millions of dollars annually. Jim Joseph – of blessed memory – was a West coast real estate titan, father of three, Wharton graduate, modern Orthodox Jew who kept the *shabbos* in his own distinctive way. Jim wanted to combat with **Education** what he saw to be an accelerating vulnerability to our people drifting from the faith. Jim joins the ranks of the Bronfmans, Steinhart, Grinspoon, Zalman Bernstein, the Crowns, and most likely the Adelsons in believing that nothing less than unprecedented philanthropic expenditures on various forms of

Jewish education made accessible and available to the next generation of Jews will revive American Jewry.

All of these mega funders recognize that in contemporary society, Judaism is a choice. Jews don't live in *shtetls*. We excel in every profession imaginable and occupy prominent positions throughout corporate, governmental and non-profit sectors. Affiliating with the temple; joining the JCC; sending a Jewish child to a Jewish camp or day school; contributing to the Federation annual and/or emergency campaigns – all of these are expressions of faith or religious identity. But every act of ritual observance and any behavior manifesting adherence to communal obligation is entirely voluntary in contemporary America.

The fact of the matter is, 21st century American democracy confers upon Jews virtually unfettered freedom. It gives us open, equal access to the riches, rewards and spoils of an advanced capitalistic state. American democracy in 2007 provides Jews the privilege of unparalleled choice. That autonomy in turn allows us countless options for deciding how to define our own Jewishness.

It is at this juncture that my experiences with Rabbi Lelyveld, the wishes and estate of Jim Joseph, and the shared interests of the

mega funders intersect and converge: We all believe that learning is the paramount way for the post-modern Jew to connect to our hallowed faith. To quote Isa Aron, the noted synagogue scholar:

“American Jews today need to enhance their Jewish learning if they want to make sense of being Jewish in the modern world...Jews who do not feel commanded by God, but who identify with the Jewish people and want to participate in Jewish life, need a foundation for understanding their Judaism and for enabling them to decide what traditions to follow. If one is going to be selective about one’s Jewish practice, one had better be fully informed. Today, Jewish learning is more essential than ever. Americans, including Jews, have discovered that excessive autonomy results in isolation and excessive skepticism leads to anomie...All Jewish learning, whether it is devoted to a study of sacred texts, Jewish thought or Jewish history, enables learners to connect their personal struggles to larger social and ethical ideals...Learning creates a larger sense of

community as well as a community that links Jews through time and space. For modern and independent American Jews, Jewish learning may be the single most important way to stay connected to Judaism.”

The Jim Joseph Foundation, in following the lead of its extraordinarily generous founder, will focus its grant making on education of Jewish children, teens, and young adults. The Foundation envisions that future generations of Jews in ever-increasing numbers will engage in continuous learning and enter into ongoing personal and communal encounters with Judaism. The Foundation will commit substantial resources to support what it deems to be compelling educational experiences. We will concentrate particularly on the sometimes seemingly intractable challenge of recruiting, training, developing and retaining high quality Jewish educators.

The Foundation’s commissioned research tells us that teaching and learning need to be tailored to the developmental needs of the learner. We recognize that peers are particularly powerful influencers on young Jews’ religious and ethnic identities. Our theory is that to

the extent that stellar Jewish educators come into contact with these peer groups, that the likelihood increases that more young Jews will be motivated to continue their Jewish journeys.

The research we funded and the countless interviews we conducted reveal two critical features permeating the lives of contemporary young Jews: their pervasive autonomy and the frequency with which they self-organize into social networks. In essence, what this means is that Jewish young people place *themselves* at the center of their learning. They move in and out of engagement with Judaism of their own volition. They join multiple peer groups, many of which exist solely in cyberspace. Depending on the nature of the group, the experience can afford young Jews intimate, personally-meaningful encounters with Judaism.

For young people, education simply cannot be centered exclusively in institutions. Jewish day schools are the bulwark against a vacuous future, and the Foundation will support day schools generously. But camping and experimental congregational learning; Israel immersion, youth philanthropy; social action and community service – these are all legitimate educational venues where superlative educators can convey a Jewish relevance that

resonates with the young and helps to create a crucible that fires youths' Jewish identity.

I will conclude with an appeal to you to continue your generous support of the Bureau of Education. I would urge you as well to remain involved in Jewish education as community leaders. As donors, you are guides and exemplars for your peers. For the next generation, you are models and mentors. I am fortunate to be in your company, and I thank you for sharing your time with me this evening.