

*A conversation with*

ELISA SPUNGEN BILDNER &  
ROBERT BILDNER

## The Power of Ethical Philanthropy



LISA SPUNGEN BILDNER and Rob Bildner have been influential, entrepreneurial, and actively engaged philanthropists in the North American Jewish community for more than two decades. They made a visionary contribution to the Jewish communal world in 1998 when they founded and provided the seed funding for the Foundation for Jewish Camp (FJC), a public foundation supporting and promoting nonprofit Jewish camps in North America. Between them, the Bildners have been active board members of many major organizations in Jewish life. Most notably, Elisa has chaired the boards of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, Jewish Funders Network, and Honeycomb (formerly Jewish Teen Funders Network); Rob was a founding board member of Repair the World; and they are both longtime board members of the Joseph Slifka Center for Jewish Life at Yale. They are also both attorneys, business entrepreneurs, and award-winning authors.

*Managing Editor Felicia Herman sat down with Elisa and Rob to discuss their views on individual power and collective collaboration in philanthropy.*

**FH:** Let's talk frankly about the role of power in philanthropy. One of the core critiques of philanthropy today—Jewish or otherwise—is that philanthropists wield too much power: They use their money to shape communal agendas and organizations in their own image, to coerce certain behaviors and beliefs among a populace whose values they don't share. What do you think of that idea?

**ESB:** I understand that there's vitriol against funders, especially mega-donors, but it's like so much of the criticism of wealth today: There's a patina of malevolence on it all. Obviously, philanthropists exert influence, but let's not inflate it too much. Givers just do what most people who care, who are involved, who have passion, do.

We don't consider ourselves mega-donors; we're not in that stratosphere. But the mega-donors are just like the rest of us—some have been phenomenal, and others have engaged in practices that might not be mine. Many of the Jewish organizations I've been involved with couldn't have survived without mega-donors, so I'm grateful to them for their generosity.

But there's also a larger principle at work here: I get concerned and distressed when *any* group of people is written off in one fell swoop. I'm trained as a lawyer, and I specialized in First Amendment law. I believe very strongly in the necessity of all individuals to speak out, no matter their perspectives, political or otherwise. We each come to life with different views, different ways we express ourselves, and that diversity is valuable.

**FH:** You both do a lot of different things with your time. How does philanthropy fit in? And can you dive a little deeper into this idea of

the diversity of givers, which seems a more distributed, multivocal idea of “power” in philanthropy than is usually assumed?

**ESB:** I look at it this way: In business and in philanthropy, we’re investors. We’re willing to take certain risks with our money to produce what we believe is a common good, something that people want and need. For example, we’ve been very involved with nonprofit Jewish summer camps, and I’ve been involved with Jewish media. With both, we’ve had big goals. We’ve tried to advance fields and to appeal to others to join us. Just like in business, if others agree with our vision and buy into it, then they join us financially. It’s a marketplace of ideas.

**RB:** We’re not forcing anything on anyone; this is all voluntary, and everyone involved has his own agency—they opt in or they don’t. We’ve been salespeople for big ideas. When we started the Foundation for Jewish Camp (FJC), for example, there were many people out there who loved camp, but they were operating in silos, weren’t learning from one another, weren’t able to realize efficiencies across the field. No one was researching the impact of camp, which turned out to be pretty substantial. So in the beginning, we had to sell the idea that this was a big idea: There was much more going on here than just summertime fun in the woods.

**FH:** The way you’re speaking about investing in organizations also reminds me of Maimonides’s ladder of charity. The top of his eight “rungs” is entering into a partnership: giving someone a loan or a gift to enable him to become self-sufficient. When a donor has a strategic vision for their giving, this relationship is a two-way street that I think many people don’t understand: The recipients need the money, and the donors need the recipients to bring their philanthropic vision to life. Does that resonate with you?

**RB:** Actually, that’s precisely how we approached the development of FJC. It requires a lot of humility. We were bringing financial

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resources and our business expertise, but we weren’t operators of camps. So we were very respectful and very committed to learning from experts in the field. Philanthropy isn’t just about putting money into something; it’s also about respecting the people in the trenches who are doing the work. This goes back to the issue of power: We’re not doing any of this in a directive way. We’re partnering with the recipients in ways that work for all of us—it’s investment, collaboration, and partnership.

**ESB:** It’s anathema to me to routinely discuss philanthropy as a power play. Some funders might act that way, but for the most part, philanthropy done well is not that. It’s always been important for us to be in a community that’s learning about philanthropy in addition to doing it—that’s why we became involved with Jewish Funders Network. Part of the learning is specifically about how *not* to be top-down, how not to push our ideas on others. That’s a surefire way to fail, both in business and philanthropy. Every successful philanthropic endeavor I’ve been involved in has been collaborative, involving networking with others, listening, a real exchange of ideas. If it’s a kind of power, then it’s the power to inspire, to listen, to bring people in.

**RB:** I’d add this: With FJC, we had financial capacity, but to be really effective, we had to earn our power. It didn’t just come along with the money. We had to earn people’s trust, we had to prove that things were working. Instead of the word “power,” I’d

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use the word “influence.” I don’t begrudge influence; I admire it. Power derives from having earned someone’s respect.

**FH:** All of the enterprises you’re discussing require a lot of money and a lot of people. The advantage of the kind of power-sharing you’re describing is clear: You can have greater impact if you band together with others. But it’s also complicated to have people with different views coming together. Can you talk about how you work through all of that?

**ESB:** An example: We decided from the beginning to create FJC as a public foundation. It wasn’t just us and our money—we needed to create something that other people could invest in. We knew we needed to recruit an outstanding board with multiple perspectives: from different denominations, ages, areas of the country, kinds of expertise. We needed to collaborate to develop a vision and a strategy that would work for a big, diverse field.

But yes—it’s not always easy. In some cases we have definitely seen what I’d call a lack of “etiquette” among some funders. Maybe they string people along, or aren’t transparent about how their decisions are made, or are playing games with people’s time and energy. But many funders who have similar values and passions can successfully play in the sandbox together, not be competitive, even if they don’t agree on everything.

**FH:** Do you think collaboration has become more difficult in

philanthropy in recent years because of political or other forms of differences? Have you seen political litmus tests for being involved with particular organizations, political agendas hidden in organizational work?

**ESB:** I really get upset about this idea of litmus tests, or when political views are superimposed on or considered in the actions of Jewish organizations, because it’s just wrong. Politics just don’t come into most of this work—it’s just not relevant.

**RB:** Of course, all of the funders we deal with have very distinct political ideologies. But what we’ve focused on in Jewish philanthropy is collaborating and partnering with folks with whom we have common ground on the issues we’re discussing. The rest of what someone believes doesn’t really matter to me—I can work with many types of people if we share something we care about. Take camp, for example: Whether the people we partner with are left, right, or center, we share a basic philosophy that Jewish camp is really important for our community. As FJC’s CEO, Jeremy Fingerman, always says: The camping field goes from the Haredim to Habonim—from the ultra-Orthodox to the labor Zionists. There’s no place, in my opinion, for bringing politics into this type of community building, which is the work that so many organizations are doing.

But yes, it has gotten harder—now there’s more of a partisan divide, and people have more extreme positions on different issues.

**ESB:** There’s an idea out there that I can’t understand, which is that we wouldn’t accept funding from someone, or wouldn’t include them on a board or in the governance of an organization, because of his politics. I’m not talking about criminals or about people with extremist or dangerous views. Outside those kinds of examples, though, we actually *need* multiple points of view, multiple political perspectives, to help sharpen our thinking. I think

every board should strive to be as inclusive as possible across political leanings. Actually—it helps us *avoid* being political, because we can't slip into groupthink or assume everyone around us agrees.

**FH:** I've seen this same dynamic on the boards I've been on, and in the giving circles that I've been a part of and helped to build. People from very different perspectives are around a table investing in the same recipients for totally different reasons. It's not just that we're discussing our views, but we actually need to accomplish things together—I think that's an incredibly important muscle to strengthen.

**ESB:** I'm so glad you raised giving circles. I know you're a giving-circle person, and I think they're really important to mention in the context of power and philanthropy because they indicate a positive direction in philanthropy: to be more inclusive. I can't tell you how many times people in the political or philanthropic arenas have told us that they don't feel they can make a difference because they don't have enough money. We've never felt that: Philanthropy just isn't a top-down power play, it's not a story of the powerful overwhelming other people with their ideas and their passions. Giving circles to me are a key example: People are sitting down to give collectively, to learn how to make decisions collectively.

This is happening with young people, too—I'm taking over as chair of the advisory board of Honeycomb, which engages teenagers in collaboratively giving and getting involved in Jewish life. And there's crowdfunding, Kickstarter, etc.—so many ways that didn't used to exist to get involved in philanthropy now. These enterprises all democratize giving. It's not always a pyramid with rich people on top; it's much more inclusive than that, much more diverse, much flatter.

**FH:** You're both alumni of the Wexner Heritage Program, which empowers emerging lay leaders with a grounding in Jewish text,

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history, and culture. Tell us about the Jewish wisdom and principles that underlie and inspire your giving.

**ESB:** We believe that Jews are responsible for one another, and in fact that's the foundation of our Jewish giving. Much of our giving is in the Jewish community, though we're also involved in secular and political causes. But we're concerned about the Jewish future. I saw an estimate that only 11 percent of giving by Jews goes to Jewish causes. That's troubling, because I don't know how we're going to sustain our community when community members don't feel compelled to give more generously.

**RB:** I agree with this concern, and I also believe that it's a Jewish principle to be active in the broader community. My parents, of blessed memory, were very active in civic institutions, from the performing-arts center to the food bank to the university systems, both because they felt obligated and because they wanted Jews to be known as donors to the community at large. The point is: We have to do *both*.

Another principle that's important to me is what you mentioned before, about Maimonides's ladder. We want to give to people, to institutions, that can utilize the gift in a very meaningful way, to enable them to be successful. We want to be their partners. That's a key Jewish principle to me.

Our focus has always been on young people. It's a tough sell, because younger people seem more interested in universalism than

in engaging with particularly Jewish organizations. I was one of the founding directors of Repair the World, which encourages young people to get involved in community service within a Jewish context. All of our work, really, has been about creating institutions to invite young Jews to engage with their heritage, their communities.

**ESB:** We also need to talk about the Federations. They're seemingly in decline, because there seems to be a shift away from what it means to be part of a collective. I think that's a mistake. Don't misunderstand me—this is in no way saying we should not be responsible for our neighbors, the world. But we also have a special responsibility for other Jews, and no one else is going to step in to assume that. One of the easiest ways to do that, it seems to me, is through the collective action of a Federation, because its work encompasses all facets of the Jewish community, including taking care of the most vulnerable among us, which is sometimes difficult to find individual philanthropic champions for. Federations support all Jews—I think we need to help Federations survive, especially in a time of individualism.

**FH:** We can't end this without talking for a moment about the COVID-19 pandemic. What we saw in the Jewish communal world was the value of organizational networks and collaborations that could wrap their arms around entire sectors or communities. And when the story of the pandemic is written, camp will be a huge part of the story. It looked as though it might collapse altogether, and not only did it not do that, but more kids will probably be able to go to camp this summer (2021) than ever.

**RB:** Yes, camp is going to be bigger than ever this year, we hope. It's extraordinary. Apart from our family, I think FJC is our greatest accomplishment.

**ESB:** The pandemic was an incredible example of so many funders coming together to ensure that the Jewish communal sector and

others would survive this terrible time. I want to offer a kind of paean to philanthropists, to the people who say, "There's a need, let's attack it. I'll take the risk that I could fail, that nobody will listen. I'm going to do it anyway." It's extraordinary. We see it in the camp world all the time, but of course it's everywhere. That's why I really bristle when negative ideas about power are associated with giving. Stop generalizing! And let's be grateful for the exemplary work so many people are doing.

**RB:** Agreed. This past year has offered a great model for how we can bridge divides, including political, partisan divides. By being respectful, trusting one another, working together, and giving generously to the things we care about and to the communities we're responsible for, especially in a time of real crisis. It's a real privilege to be a part of it. \*