

Invest in Philanthropy



WE NEED a moonshot for Jewish philanthropy. Why not aim for universal Jewish giving?

This would mean not only that all Jews would give, but that some portion of every Jewish person's giving would go to Jewish or Israeli causes.

Such an idea touches on a core Jewish value: The Talmud teaches that giving is incumbent on everyone—“even a poor person who is sustained from *tzedakah* must also perform *tzedakah*” (Gittin 7b). For Jews, giving is not a rich person's game. It's supposed to be a mass, universal experience, and Jewish wisdom and history are rife with examples of why and how mass giving should happen. It's also an idea reinforced by the American Jewish experience of being expected, from the days of Peter Stuyvesant onward, to take care of our own, and nearly four centuries of proudly having done so.

This powerful idea can also serve as a rejoinder to contemporary complaints about Jewish philanthropy. Don't like what someone else gives to, what their politics are, or how they made their money? Great

news: Since you're also supposed to give, you can use your giving to help make whatever change *you* want to see in the world. Worried that your money doesn't matter? Join together with others, in a giving circle or a Federation or another collective giving enterprise, to have a greater impact than you could have on your own.

But the key takeaway is: No one is supposed to opt out—never mind opting out and then complaining.

American Jews are generous people. The exact numbers vary per study, but they generally agree: Jews give more to charity than most if not all other American ethnic or religious groups, and most Jews give. But it's certainly not universal. Nor, especially, is giving to Jewish causes. Pew's 2020 study of American Jews found that 48 percent of respondents said they had given to a Jewish cause in the past year. *Connected to Give* (2014), one of the few statistical studies of Jewish giving, found a slightly more encouraging number—58 percent.

There's no question that these numbers are shrinking over time, as barriers to entry to non-Jewish causes have vanished, and as Jewish affiliation and a sense of Jewish particularism weaken. Fewer dollars mean less good work can happen; fewer donors means decreasing diversity in the donor pool, concentrating disproportionate power—and burden—among those who remain.

Universal Jewish giving to Jewish causes is an excellent way to ensure not only that Jewish communal institutions thrive, but also that their work reflects the full diversity of the Jewish people itself.

How do we get there?

Tzedakah (giving, charity, philanthropy) needs to be embedded in all Jewish educational and engagement efforts. I'm not talking about fundraising. I'm talking about *tzedakah* both as a way into big Jewish questions and ideas, and also as a behavioral muscle that needs to be exercised. Everything we do in Jewish organizations and institutions can be deepened, illuminated, and explored by integrating

conversations about and experiences with *tzedakah*. Philosophically, discussing questions about giving (to whom, why, how, and how much) touches on the deepest questions about human responsibility and community. Educationally, there's no better way to learn deeply about any issue (Israel, gender, disabilities, etc.) than to survey the organizational landscape in service of investing in it.

And attitudinally, giving through the lens of Jewish wisdom can help build the type of Jewish citizenry we need: humble, generous, interconnected, knowledgeable, and engaged.

Maimonides, who wrote volumes on *tzedakah*, knew this well. His famous eight-rung ladder of charity, ascending from begrudging gifts to deep partnership, puts a primary value on the giver's humility and on respect for the recipient. Maimonides also made the thought-provoking argument that acquiring the trait of generosity was even more important than the impact of the funding on the recipient: If you have 1,000 coins, he wrote, you should give them away *one by one*, a thousand times, rather than all at once in a single gift. The repetition of the act builds the necessary muscle for generosity.

We're not starting from scratch in making Jewish giving universal, but we have a lot of work to do.

1 | *People need more, and more creative, ways to give.*

Getting more people to give requires creating many more vehicles that reflect the multiplicity of reasons why people give that are excellent, innovative, empowering, and responsive to the market. Everywhere people turn, they should come across a way to give Jewishly that reflects their interests, values, and income level: giving circles, teen and women's foundations, venture funds, and digital giving platforms. Let's create new enterprises and strengthen our existing resources. For more people to find their philanthropic homes, we need to build a lot more homes.

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2 | *Articulate better ways for people to think through the importance of giving to Jewish causes.*

Jewish givers need to overcome the pressures of universalism that dampen or erase the sense that Jews have a special connection to and responsibility for one another. We need many loud, proud, joyful, confident answers to the question of why it is okay for Jews to care about other Jews and the Jewish state more or differently than they care about others. Rabbi Yitz Greenberg has given us one helpful framing: "Start with your family first, then your neighborhood, your country ... expand philanthropy and *tikkun* work outward, until the whole world is perfected."

3 | *Bring Jewish ideas into American conversations about giving.*

Ideas about giving permeate Judaism and Jewish culture, and the ideas are beautiful. The moral and behavioral values of generosity and humility, the need to care for the vulnerable, mutual responsibility, communal thriving: Jewish wisdom has something to say about all of this. Let's do a better job of sharing these as broadly as possible. I was once at an event—a Jewish event—where the speaker praised "the Mormon tradition of tithing." Although more Mormons might tithe than others, they got that idea from the Jews. Let's find

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ways to infuse the public sphere with Jewish ideas that can guide *anyone's* giving. We have tremendous wisdom to share.

4 | *Raise awareness of the breadth of Jewish and Israeli causes.*

Years ago I observed a focus group of foundation directors and philanthropic advisers discussing why their Jewish donors and clients didn't give to Jewish causes. The consensus was that Jewish giving was "personal" rather than "strategic"—a stereotype easily countered by the many foundations, Federations, and individuals making strategic, data-informed philanthropic decisions every day. Another statement that caused heads to nod that day: "Jewish giving is all Israel, Federations, and synagogues, and my donor isn't interested in those things." This, too, is far from accurate. Fifteen years of running Natan, a venture philanthropy focused on supporting emerging Jewish and Israeli organizations, taught me that there's little a donor could be interested in that can't be supported through a Jewish or Israeli organization. We need to be telling these stories; we can't afford the inefficiency of ignorance.

5 | *Invest in philanthropic matchmaking.*

If we want every donor to be able to find something to which they're inspired to give, we need to be actively, and proactively,

connecting givers with recipients. Federations, community foundations, and new national and local philanthropic entities need to devote considerable time and talent to actively inspiring donors with the wide range of causes their charitable dollars might support. This isn't simple or cheap. Excellent philanthropy professionals marry professionalism with savvy, knowledge with feeling, and mechanics with emotional intelligence. Philanthropy is both art and science. We need to be recruiting, developing, and sustaining talented professionals for whom inspiring and enabling others to give is a mission and a calling.

6 | *Further develop Israel as a philanthropic destination.*

Israel is a country with all of the elements for charitable support that inspire giving elsewhere: health care, poverty, education, religion, culture, security, academia, etc. Anyone who cares about these issues can find them in Israel, often with fascinating twists that lead to a much deeper understanding of the country and its people. For those who are concerned about aspects of Israel's policies, *investment* is a much more productive response, with more immediate results, than *divestment*. Philanthropy provides an unparalleled opportunity for people to engage with, and take a stake in, the very real challenges and opportunities of this very real place.

7 | *Grow the pie, rather than argue about how it's divided.*

We live in a time where Philanthropy—capital P—is the focus of a great deal of criticism. But the critics would better spend their time building up the organizations they like instead of tearing down the ones they don't. The world needs more giving, not less. The critics tend to ignore that giving in America has always been a mass enterprise. Foundation giving represented only 19 percent of American

giving in 2020. In the Jewish community, one recent estimate posited that the largest 250 foundations (many of which are unstaffed, technical vehicles through which wealthy people give) made up a similar one-fifth of the total. Why obsess over how a few people are spending their money? The way to universalize, and thereby democratize, Jewish giving is to bring many more people into charitable giving.



For any of these changes to happen effectively and at scale, major Jewish funders need to invest in Jewish philanthropy itself. We need sophisticated funders who are used to supporting capacity building, infrastructure, and field-building to invest in systemic change. “Funding philanthropy” is a tough sell, in part because it results in empowering some people to give to causes you might not like. But without infrastructure investments, without efforts to move us toward universal giving, even your own favorite organizations are in peril. It’s like planting a tree in poor soil and wondering why it’s not thriving. The tree will wither if the soil isn’t nurtured and watered.

There are some models to look toward.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has become a preeminent funder of American philanthropy, with The Giving Pledge (“a promise by the world’s wealthiest individuals and families to dedicate the majority of their wealth to charitable causes”), the Giving by All initiative (supporting “research, experimentation, and product development to understand how to motivate and amplify generosity by everyday givers”), and Gates Philanthropy Partners (a public charity enabling anyone to make use of the foundation’s expertise and align his or her giving with the foundation’s priorities). Who will take on this responsibility for Jewish philanthropy?

There’s also a collaborative playbook to follow: From 1998 to 2008, with funding from 15 major foundations (including Ford, Kellogg, and Rockefeller), the Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers ran New Ventures in Philanthropy, a multipronged

initiative to expand the number and types of people giving in America; to support philanthropic infrastructure like donor-advised funds, community foundations, and giving circles; to build partnerships to promote philanthropy; to conduct vital research into American giving; and to support research and media to draw attention to the benefits of philanthropy. It would be easy for Jewish funders to join together to create this type of collaborative, systemic approach to strengthening Jewish philanthropy.



Years ago, the head of a major new foundation asked me for suggestions about areas the foundation should focus on. I suggested philanthropy. “No, we’re looking for the next Big Idea,” she said, “the next Birthright Israel.” I knew what would happen: She would hopefully find a Big Idea and launch it into the world. Soon, she’d turn to the usual major funders to support it. Assuming a few signed on, they’d have a few good years before, inevitably (and correctly), the funders would say: “This is such a great program! And we’ve engaged so many people! Why are we the only ones funding it—where are the individual donors?”

Then those funders would be where I am now: wondering who’s tending the soil, who’s shoring up the foundation, who’s fixing the furnace of Jewish philanthropic giving itself.

We need a broad-based, diverse, and multifaceted approach to get us to universal Jewish giving, supported by a collaboration of major funders, including Federations. The COVID-19 pandemic inspired record amounts of American and American Jewish giving—proving definitively that *so many more people will give, and give more*, when properly motivated. We need to revitalize and expand the ecosystem of American Jewish giving. Our efforts need to touch millions of American Jews, at all income levels, ages, and religious and political persuasions. Universal Jewish giving needs to reflect the dreams and dispositions of us all. *