

# How Funders Shape Jewish Culture

*A conversation with*

MEM BERNSTEIN &

SHAYNA ROSE TRIEBWASSER



ARTS AND CULTURE are often deeply intertwined with philanthropy. From Michelangelo to MoMA, artists and the institutions that showcase their work have long been supported by patrons. Some fund the arts for their aesthetic power and because they believe in the value of art for art's sake. Others do it to promote specific values and ideas they want to see out in the world, knowing the unique power of arts and culture to educate, inspire, and make change—to open minds, touch hearts, and broaden our understanding of the world.

To explore some of the interactions between philanthropy and culture, SAPIR's Associate Editor Felicia Herman invited two funders of Jewish arts and culture to discuss their distinct approaches to this work. Mem Bernstein is a philanthropist who has supported a wide variety of media in North America and Israel as a board member of the AVI CHAI Foundation, Keren Keshet, and the Tikvah Fund. Shayna Rose Triebwasser is

*the executive director of the Righteous Persons Foundation (RPF) and senior program officer of the Hearthland Foundation, both funded by Kate Capshaw and Steven Spielberg.*

**Felicia Herman:** You both represent important and rare streams of funding for Jewish cultural projects. There are areas of overlap and also areas of real difference between you. Let's start with the basics: What does "Jewish culture" mean to you, and why is funding culture part of your respective philanthropic strategies?

**Mem Bernstein:** My definition of Jewish culture is anything that's tethered to Jewish text and Jewish heritage. The goal of all of the foundations I'm involved with is to support projects grounded in strong Jewish content, related to our people's sources and stories. This takes many forms: publishing, podcasting, online and print journals, art exhibits, lectures, scholarship. I'm particularly proud of our film and television projects in Israel, where we partner with the Maimonides Fund and the Israeli government's Geshet Multicultural Film Fund. We supported *Shtisel*, which has expanded so many people's understanding of the ultra-Orthodox world. Many of our films have won Israel's Ophir Awards and been nominated for Academy Awards, such as *Footnote* (2011), about a father and a son who are both Talmud professors at Hebrew University, and *Black Notebooks: Ronit* (2021), an intimate look at a Mizrahi family in Israel. I'm also very proud of our support for *Tablet*, a daily digital magazine, which includes everything from news about Jewish communities, Israel, and the Middle East, to arts and letters, food, science, history, sports, culture, and a growing array of podcasts.

Culture is part of my philanthropic strategy because it appeals to everyone. We're hoping that through our cultural programs, we have an opportunity to enlighten people in a positive way, to showcase the diversity of the Jewish story through historical as well as

contemporary Jewish narratives. Since 1999, we have funded over 500 hours of primetime television, cinema, and documentary films.

**Shayna Rose Triebwasser:** My definition of Jewish culture is a little broader than the one Mem articulated, although that is an impressive slate of projects! I would include all arts, rituals, and customs that are expressive of Jewish history, values, or ideas. They aren't necessarily text-based, but they're joyously broad and reflective of the way that many people live today.

I can't overstate how central the arts and storytelling are to RPF's theory of change. Steven Spielberg and Kate Capshaw created RPF with the proceeds from *Schindler's List* (1993) and have supported it with additional profits from *Munich* (2005) and *Lincoln* (2012). The foundation is built on the power of stories. We're rooted in Jewish values and dedicated to building a more just and vibrant future, for the Jewish community and beyond. The belief that the arts and storytelling matter—that they change us, help us make sense of our lives, connect us to one another—flows through everything that we do.

The majority of our arts and culture funding centers on field-building and film, but we have funded everything from photography to performing arts. A few examples: Twenty years ago, Rachel Levin, our former executive director, co-founded Reboot, which gathers Jewish creatives and connects them to Jewish ideas and to one another. This incredible network has generated powerful cultural projects, some of which we've also supported directly. More recently, we've launched a few major philanthropic collaborations to strengthen the culture field more generally: Jewish Story Partners (JSP), which in just two years has become a significant new source of funding for Jewish film, and Canvas, which provides grants and capacity-building assistance to a wide variety of arts and culture organizations.

**Herman:** In a definition that is so broad, how do you know where the boundaries lie between “Jewish” and “not Jewish” culture?

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**Triebwasser:** This is a beautiful and tricky question. There's no scientific answer. The goal of all of this work is to be part of a 4,000-year-old story, a story that has something to say about how we might make meaning of our lives today. There are a lot of ways to tap into that. For JSP for example, this is a live question for every project they consider supporting. For example, would JSP support a biography of someone who happens to be Jewish if the film itself had no explicit Jewish content? Eventually they came to a “person on the street” consensus: If the subject of the biography was widely known to be Jewish, then the film was eligible for support, because the Jewishness of the subject would necessarily shape the audience's understanding of Jewish life.

**Herman:** Both of you are trying to use film and media to fill gaps in people's Jewish knowledge and to inspire emotional connections to Jewish stories. This is important work and also quite rare—many Jewish funders are reluctant to support arts and culture projects because the impact is so hard to measure. How do you know what you're supporting is working in the way you want it to?

**Bernstein:** I understand the reluctance. It is difficult to measure success, and programs can be quite costly. This funding is also risky: You can't know what a project will ultimately look like when you start out. We've even taken our names off a few projects because the end result was so different from the initial concept. There are some ways to measure success—awards, ratings, ticket sales, etc. But in this field, these aren't perfect measures, so in a way, you also have to use your own judgment and common sense.

I meet many people who tell me that what we're doing is great, and I believe it is, even if it's hard to know for sure.

**Triebwasser:** I'd add that we need to have a creative approach to *qualitative* measurement—the way art and culture get into our souls, shaping the ways we think about the world. This is difficult to measure using traditional tools, yet we all know it to be true from our own experiences.

In funding arts and culture, sometimes you just need to take a leap of faith. Few people believe in their ability to identify a great piece of art before it's been completed—they get tripped up by thinking their mission is to find the next Marc Chagall. But there is no “next Marc Chagall.” There is, however, a choreographer like Adam McKinney, a filmmaker like Lacey Schwartz, a photographer like Frédéric Brenner—working artists who have something important to say. The closer we can get to their work and the ideas they're exploring, the better our funding can be. As Mem mentioned, the creative process isn't always linear—we don't know where projects will wind up. So we have to practice patience and have a longer view.

Here's the thing, though: It's hard to be patient when our problems feel so incredibly urgent. At a time when our world feels as if it's on fire, with racial injustice, threats to democracy, a climate in crisis, many people think that art is a luxury, not a necessity. I don't agree. The Jewish story always has something to say about the moment that we find ourselves in, something we can learn from. Even in the darkest of times, the art and culture that's produced can be beautiful and joyous. And I believe that beauty and joy can be fuel for movements for justice.

**Herman:** This also connects to one of the core debates about philanthropy and culture: Should we fund art simply for art's sake, for the sheer quality of it, or should we fund art in an instrumentalist way, toward particular ends? The former might seem like more

of a luxury, while funding art that's intended to educate or shape hearts and minds in particular ways might seem more necessary and urgent. But does the instrumentalist approach compromise the artist's autonomy and authentic artistic expression?

**Bernstein:** Our goal is to marry artistic talent and value with Jewish content, to use art as a vehicle for disseminating Jewish content. Philanthropists are motivated by a mission and a purpose, and the artists, filmmakers, or writers they're supporting are driven by the desire to make the beautiful and meaningful creations of their dreams. There's no conflict as long as there's alignment between the funders and the people telling the stories.

As to the question about the influence funders might have over artists they support, I see myself rather as being able to help gifted people whom I admire to do the things that they do best. When, for example, talented artists, writers, and filmmakers are exposed to the richness of Jewish life and culture in a serious way, without watering down the Jewish content, it enhances the quality of their art. Through Gesher, we've created multiday educational programs where artists engage with Jewish texts and culture that are tailored to the scripts they're developing. Leading Israeli film and television writers from diverse cultural and social backgrounds study together in a *beit midrash* setting. They tell us that the texts, the process of study, and the sharing of ideas and challenges have become an integral part of who they are as people and as artists.

I don't think of myself as pushing a point of view. I think of myself more as bringing to light the kinds of information that most people don't have, information that comes from who we are as a people, from our texts and from our history.

**Triebwasser:** For me, it comes back to relationships and trust. Artists need to be trusted to do what they do best. Some need funders to get out of the way, while others want and benefit from collaborative partnerships. Funders need to be very clear about

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their values and their intentions. We're not top-down or directive; we're communicative and collaborative.

Art absolutely deserves to exist for its own sake. At the same time, it doesn't exist in a vacuum—it's produced and, at least initially, consumed within a particular context. As my colleagues and I often remind one another, it can heal *and* it can harm. Our grantmaking seeks to amplify stories that complicate existing narratives and that are in conversation with the broader culture. That often means lifting up storytellers whose voices have been underrepresented in public conversations.

The funders behind RPF are artists, so there's lived wisdom, lived understanding, about the work of creating culture. And not just any artists: They're master storytellers. A key way this plays out for us is in the primacy of artistic excellence. None of what we've talked about—the ways art can inspire, educate, build empathy, and move us to take action—works if the art in question doesn't work *as art*. Outside of the field-building initiatives we support, when RPF is funding artists or work directly, we have to know the artists, their past work, how they connect with audiences, who they are working with on marketing and distribution, all of those pieces of the puzzle. Artistic excellence and ability to connect with an audience—that's the kind of risk we try to mitigate up front.

**Herman:** Great artists are often great, though, because they offer

unique insight into the human experience—because they're standing outside the mainstream and they're willing to be critical of it. How do you address the tension between supporting artists who might see their role as exposing problems and exploring important issues from new angles—if you also have the goal of strengthening Jewish life? Can you support artists who might criticize the very thing you're there to promote?

**Triebwasser:** A big piece of Jewish culture is that we are a people who grapple with the big issues of life, and often, with one another. Our foundation's support for arts and culture is about humanizing people and showing complexity. We're living at a time when portrayals of Jews have been flattened and oversimplified. But we want to help create a multidimensional, multiracial representation of what Jewish life and Jews actually look like. The more we can showcase the diversity of thought, experiences, perspectives, lifestyles, and the racial makeup of our communities, the more authentic, impactful, and humanizing our stories can be. If we're only flattering, I don't think we're fully humanizing. Humans are messy.

In other words, for me, "good for the Jews" includes complicating our narratives. That absolutely does not mean perpetuating harmful stereotypes. A portrayal that seeks to harm, that is not individualized, that demonizes a group of people—that is not something we're going to fund. But something that asks hard questions, or that calls us into a process of reckoning and repair—we might be more willing to support such a project than others would be.

**Bernstein:** I'm guessing we would draw the line in different places on this question. I want our funding to be used to tell realistic, constructive, thought-provoking stories about things going on in Israel and in Jewish communities everywhere. We don't want to do harm, we want to do good. We've been fortunate to work with gifted filmmakers, writers, and artists who understand the richness of Jewish

life and culture—and who, at times, highlight problems and ways we can improve Jewish life that should be on our individual and communal radars. But there are limits. We’ve turned down projects that we thought struck bad notes, that seemed to us to be bashing the Jewish people or Israel.

But we will fund controversial stories. For example, we supported the film *Fill the Void* (2012), about a Hasidic family in which a young wife dies in childbirth, and her mother suggests that the wife’s sister marry the widowed husband to keep the son-in-law and grandson connected to the wife’s family. It’s a deeply Jewish story. And it was very controversial. But it wasn’t negative, it was thought-provoking. When a piece of work spotlights a problem in a way that feels sensitive and insightful, it can also offer us a way forward. This doesn’t feel like bashing the Jews or Israel—it feels like educating, informing, and enlightening.

**Herman:** Your reference to controversy and “bashing” raises for me the question of the relationship between art and politics. What do you think about the use of the arts for political purposes, as opposed to educational purposes or, as we said, simply to showcase artistic excellence?

**Triebwasser:** I think art can be a powerful tool for advancing rights and building connections that shape our politics. The Hearthland Foundation has a strategy called “art x justice” that recognizes art and artists on the front lines for justice. It funds artists who are creating public work that sparks moral imagination about the issues we are facing, and that offers different visions for a better world—one that we could build together if only we could see it and commit to working on it together.

**Bernstein:** I think the challenge with that approach is that while artists often think they’re on the front lines for justice, there are, of course, different understandings of what justice looks like. It’s often

hard, if not impossible, to judge until a particular moment is in history’s rearview mirror. So many people who have stood for terrible, even tragic ideas believed in the moment that they were acting in the name of justice. I also think that it’s too limiting to reduce art to politics or ideology. In my view, art can be—it should at least try to be—bigger, more transcendent than that. \*