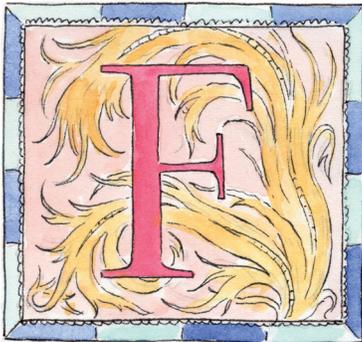


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Broadening the Base of Jewish Giving

Relying on the largesse of the few prizes efficiency over community



FOR MUCH of the 20th century, fundraising for Jewish causes entailed a considerable measure of social pressure. The rationale was straightforward: Whereas in the Middle Ages Jewish community leaders had the authority to tax their members, today's Jewish institutions rely on voluntary contributions. To nudge donors to do the “right” thing and give generously, various forms of peer pressure became integral to the philanthropic enterprise. Among them were “card calling” and other practices requiring donors to announce their financial pledges in public settings. Many Jews chafed at these forms of social pressure. But there was ample evidence that people gave more generously when called on by their peers either in public or private settings.

In the immediate aftermath of October 7, 2023, wealthy donors in several communities attended events at which variations of card calling were enacted, resulting in stunning dollar commitments. For the most part, though, Jewish giving in recent years has become a far more private matter. Like their non-Jewish neighbors, Jews have internalized America's individualism, which stresses the absolute right of everyone to set his own priorities free of social pressures. When coupled with the collapse of discriminatory barriers that once kept Jews off prestigious boards, the individualistic mindset prompted many to redirect their giving from what they regarded as parochial Jewish causes to universal ones.



These shifts have prompted Jewish organizations to rethink how they raise money. Many now tend to focus on a target population of wealthy donors rather than appeal to a wide swathe of smaller givers. A single \$50,000 donation can often be raised far more efficiently than 10 \$5,000 gifts. Rather than encourage widespread giving, organizations now opt for cost-effectiveness. The growing popularity of crowdfunding may reverse some of these trends, but thus far only the Haredi sector has managed to raise large sums using this technology, especially when appealing online to aid specific families requiring emergency support.

In purely monetary terms, the outcome of these changes has been wildly successful. A study conducted in 2013 estimated all giving to Jewish causes as running between \$4.5 billion and \$6.5 billion. My own research on giving at the beginning of the current decade, a short seven years later, pegs the amount as between \$13 billion and \$14 billion. (We lack an accounting of the amounts donated during the trying period since October 7, 2023.)

No doubt the pursuit of big gifts has ensured a healthy bottom line for a great many Jewish institutions and benefited Jews at home and abroad.

But the privatization of Jewish giving and the heavy reliance on wealthy contributors coincide with a precipitous decline in the proportion of American Jews who donate to Jewish causes. Whereas Jewish philanthropy in the 20th century was characterized by mass giving, significant sectors of the Jewish population now abstain from supporting any Jewish cause. The 2020 Pew study of Jewish Americans found that only 48 percent of Jews surveyed claimed they had donated to a Jewish cause during the previous year. This contrasted with findings in national surveys conducted in earlier decades, which reported rates of giving to Jewish causes that were between 55 and 60 percent—and figures were considerably higher during years of emergency funding for Israel. (Anecdotal evidence suggests that Jews who had never given or had become lapsed donors also came out of the woodwork after October 7, but we currently lack data on their numbers.)

So if the percentage of Jews donating has generally gone down, where are these large sums of dollars coming from?

The conventional answer traces the funding to the emergence over the past several decades of well-endowed, professionally staffed foundations incorporating support for Jewish causes in their missions. But this is not the case. In fact, the large majority of dollars supporting Jewish institutions do not flow from foundations, nor are they coming from the wealthiest tier of Jews. Jews of more modest means but consistent commitment have become the backbone ensuring that the key institutions of Jewish life—synagogues, schools, cultural centers, human-services organizations and defense agencies in this country and Israel—have the resources to function. In the aggregate, donors who contribute tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars rather than

millions provide the financial lifeblood for Jewish communal life.

Where do the foundations come in? Rather than shore up existing institutions, they are, primarily, taking chances on new, often ambitious initiatives. The division of labor between the sustaining funders and the innovators has made it possible for Jewish communal life to thrive and remain nimble as new challenges arise.

In recent decades, the demographic profile of funders has also changed. In the past, men over the age of 50 were the primary funders of Jewish causes. Today, many younger men and women have the discretionary funds to give generously. To cite one example, a funder I interviewed noted nonchalantly that in her community, several men in their 30s and 40s had already “made their first billion.” Sums of income that would have been inconceivable at that age a few decades ago are now not extraordinary in some circles. It is not uncommon for younger people to amass smaller but still significant fortunes. In short, the booming stock market and economic expansion have made it possible for Jewish donors of means and diverse backgrounds to step up their giving.

The gender distribution of the donor population has also shifted in this century. Overall, women are more likely to donate to Jewish causes than men are. And among those with significant wealth, women play a large role overseeing family funding decisions and in many cases in donating money they earned on their own. Some women run foundations established by their families or serve as senior professionals within them.

Other categories of donors also have emerged as noteworthy contributors. Adults descended from immigrants who fled the former Soviet Union have enjoyed rapid upward mobility. Though not necessarily involved in Jewish religious life, they express their connection to the Jewish people through philanthropic largesse. A few who achieved great success in Silicon Valley—WhatsApp founders

Eugene Fooksman and Jan Koum, for example—are very significant contributors to Jewish causes.

Then there are Orthodox Jews who have created a philanthropic universe of their own. A vast network of synagogues, educational institutions running from early childhood into adulthood, and *Gemachs* (societies providing free goods and services) serves Orthodox populations in the United States and Israel. Both traditional Sephardi Jews and Orthodox Ashkenazi Jews fund these programs. When asked why they give, Orthodox Jews are likely to cite specific religious commandments, such as *ma'aser* (tithing). Some immediately set aside a tenth of their earnings every time their income surges. They also are motivated by the belief that they are ensuring the Jewish future by nurturing the next generation of the most engaged Jews.

This sense of shared purpose and destiny is a motivating factor outside the Orthodox Jewish community as well. Non-Orthodox donors are more likely to explain their giving as motivated by a responsibility they feel to aid fellow Jews. Crosstabs from the 2020 Pew study on Jewish Americans show that between 60 and 70 percent of respondents who described caring about Israel and being part of a Jewish community as essential to their Jewishness contributed to Jewish causes. And nearly three-quarters of those who stated that helping Jews in need around the world mattered a great deal to them were donors. During interviews I conducted with fundraising professionals at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic and again after October 7, I repeatedly heard about donors who wrote checks to aid individuals coping with food insecurity, family dislocation, discrimination, or violence in the U.S. and Israel to overcome their sense of helplessness in the face of suffering.

The examples just cited are illustrative of donor types that have become major players in Jewish philanthropic life. But there are

many other noteworthy categories of givers. The donor population reflects the broad diversity of the American Jewish population.



There is, alas, another side to this story: Why do slightly more than half of American Jews abstain from supporting Jewish causes?

Here, too, the 2020 Pew study offers some revealing information. Perhaps the least surprising finding is the correlation between minimal exposure to Jewish education in childhood and the unlikeliness of giving to Jewish causes in adulthood. The more years of enrollment in a Jewish day school, part-time religious school, or summer camp, the more likely it is that a person will donate to Jewish causes as an adult — and the converse is true as well.

The social environment of Jewish adults also plays a prominent role in philanthropic decisions. Only 28 percent of Jews with a non-Jewish spouse or partner gave to Jewish causes. Friendship circles also are key variables. Just about three-quarters of Jews who claim to have hardly any Jewish friends do not give.

Also noteworthy in our hyper-politicized age are the correlations between political identification and Jewish giving. Jews who self-identify as “very liberal” are the least likely to give to Jewish causes, while those who claim to be political liberals and conservatives were much more likely to make contributions. More than two-thirds of self-identified “very conservative” Jews were donors to Jewish causes, making them the most likely to give. Left-wing critics of Jewish philanthropy who complain that Jewish communal life is stacked against them should be reminded that progressives have largely removed themselves from the scene by abstaining from Jewish giving.

When contemplating the future of Jewish giving, those concerned

about the vitality of Jewish communal life might draw some conclusions from these trends.

To begin, in light of the strong correlation between exposure to intensive Jewish education and adult giving, current donors would do well to ensure that the coming generations will share their commitments. They should invest in the expansion and accessibility of Jewish education, which is also an investment in future investors in Jewish life. One way to do that is to give to a broad range of Jewish educational institutions, and to do so with the knowledge that more formal and informal Jewish education leads to better giving outcomes. The time has long passed when Jews can be expected to seek connection to Jewish life based solely on good feelings. Jewish knowledge and Jewish literacy are vital for building Jewish identity.

Families have an important role to play as educators of their younger generations, including as future supporters of Jewish life. The Jewish Future Promise, which has signed over 130,000 families to commit half of their testamentary charitable gifts to Jewish causes, has it right when it emphasizes the importance of intergenerational conversations about Jewish giving. Forthright communication enables older generations to share why being Jewish is important to them and why they find it meaningful to support Jewish endeavors. Such conversations are not initially about money, but values, commitment, and belonging.

Low rates of giving to Jewish causes among Jews who have few if any co-religionists in their surroundings also ought to stimulate new thinking about how to reintegrate those who have distanced themselves. It may be more cost-effective for organizations to focus on big givers and ignore those who can donate only small sums. But the casualty of this strategy is a culture of giving among all Jews, even those of lesser means. Givers in the latter category may one day have more substantial means. More important, philanthropic giving is an

expression of participation and involvement. By casting a wide net to reach as many potential donors as possible, Jewish organizations would communicate that all Jews count.

Reaching out to the unengaged is not solely the responsibility of institutions and their leaders. Most Jews know other Jews who are distant from Jewish life. Including them can make a significant impact by spurring curiosity among the uninvolved. There was wisdom in 20th-century efforts to embrace the wide swathe of American Jews through peer relationships; this warrants replication, not through coercion but invitation.

All must feel welcome in the tent, like Abraham's. After all, it was in that tent that Abraham showed such largesse to the visiting angels, who foretold of his progeny and the Jewish future. *

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