

Jewish Philanthropy 2.0

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by Alex Joffe

There is no lack of worthy causes, and American society is uniquely blessed by charitable giving from all members of society. Among the country's very biggest philanthropists, Jews continue to be disproportionately represented, taking five out of the top six spots and comprising nine out of the 53 individuals and couples on the Chronicle of Philanthropy's recently published top-50 list for 2010.

Jewish mega-donors are hardly news. It is also a commonplace that wealthy Jews allocate less than 25 percent of their giving to specifically Jewish causes. Of the two facts, the latter has understandably puzzled and frustrated fund raisers for Jewish causes as well as students of American philanthropy. But is it really so mysterious?

Jewish philanthropists have always seen themselves, or have wished to see themselves, as members of the American class defined by its support of the great civic causes of the day. The causes may change, but the pattern remains the same. Take two perennial stand-bys: hospitals and higher education. Among last year's top 50, the investor Leonard Blavatnik has pledged \$117 million to establish the Blavatnik School of Government at Oxford University. Marc Benioff, the founder of salesforce.com, and his wife Lynne gave \$100 million to the children's hospital of the University of California at San Francisco. Irwin M. Jacobs, a founder of Qualcomm, and his wife Joan pledged \$75 million to a new medical center at the University of California at San Diego. Showing regard for today's health concerns in particular, Larry Ellison, the founder of Oracle, gave \$45.1 million to his Ellison Medical Foundation for stem-cell research and the study of age-related diseases and disabilities.

If philanthropists are attracted to higher education, they are also increasingly called upon to pick up the slack left by government failure at lower levels. Last year, the home builder and financial-services mogul Eli Broad and his wife Edythe gave \$10 million to the Washington, D.C. Public Education Fund, \$2.2 million to the Education Innovation Laboratory at Harvard, and \$2 million to a Los Angeles charter-schools foundation. Lin Arison, the widow of the founder of

Carnival Cruise Lines, sold a Monet and a Modigliani and put the proceeds of \$39 million into her National Foundation for Advancement in the Arts.

Among younger Jews, Mark Zuckerberg, the twenty-six-year-old Facebook founder, pledged \$100 million to the Newark, New Jersey school system.

Another such gift, of \$25 million, came from William A. Ackman, the hedge-fund manager whose other local causes included the Innocence Project and Centurion Ministries, both of which work to free the wrongfully convicted. Others in the younger Jewish cohort on the top-50 list show a preference for social entrepreneurship over institutions.

All of these causes are undoubtedly worthwhile; none is particularly Jewish (though some might point out that education has always been a core Jewish value).

That is not to say, though, that Jewish causes and giving to Israel are wholly absent from the priorities of the top 50. Stephen and Nancy Grand gave more than \$20 million to the American Technion Society. Irwin and Joan Jacobs pledged \$39.1 million to their fund at the Jewish Community Foundation of San Diego. William Ackman gave \$6.8 million toward retiring the debt of the Center for Jewish History in New York. Still, conspicuously absent from the top-line causes are Jewish day schools, yeshivas, educational or communal services in Israel or in Europe, or programs in Jewish identity and continuity, let alone in Jewish ideas.

And therein lies one much-noted difference between yesterday and today. However much the major American Jewish philanthropists of former times gave to non-Jewish institutions, many clearly felt no less obligated to answer the call of the Jewish community. From Rebecca Gratz, who founded the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society in 1819, all the way through the 20th century, wealthy American Jews could be counted on to bestow equivalently large gifts upon the community's eleemosynary institutions and defense agencies and to rise to the needs of the state of Israel and Jews worldwide. That seems less and less the case; at the extremes, indeed, it seems to be morphing into something much more problematic.

Enter the biggest Jewish philanthropist of them all. Last year, George Soros gave a whopping \$332 million to his Open Societies Foundations, which operate throughout Eastern and Central Europe, plus another \$100 million to Human Rights Watch. More than anything, Soros represents the growing influence of a numerically small but vocal minority in the Jewish world that is ruthlessly

dedicated to cosmopolitanism. To the extent that Israel and Jewishness interfere with this value and identity, they are opposed—in the case of Soros, with large amounts of cash. There is scarcely an anti-Israel cause with which he is not involved, from softer ones like J Street to hard-line ones like Human Rights Watch.

Although Soros is unique, at least with respect to the scale of his generosity if not his ferocity, his anti-Israel and anti-Jewish inclination is not. The older Jewish mega-philanthropy, concentrated in the support of institutions meant for the ages, was motivated by a simultaneous desire to do good and to commemorate the goodness of the donor. Less tangible but no less real was the memorialization of Jewish acceptance into American society, as if to say: a Jew did this, and America allowed a Jew to do this. One message of the new Jewish mega-giving would seem to be not only that Jews have arrived but that, as with other members of their class, the primary terms of their identities, allegiances, and civic engagements are increasingly attuned to transnational causes and largely unshaped by, or positively averse to, explicitly Jewish concerns or values.

Of course, the list of the top 50 donors hardly captures the full range of Jewish philanthropy. Smaller donors are increasingly leveraging their resources collectively through mechanisms like the Jewish Funders Network, and a number of well-endowed foundations—the names include Koret, Taube, Wexner, Dorot, Bronfman, Schusterman, Marcus, Adelson, and others—continue strongly to support Jewish causes and Israel. And this is not to take into account Jews at all levels of wealth who give to Israel, to local UJAs and federations, and to their synagogues and day schools.

Still, the symbolic weight of the mega-donors is telling, and their priorities help shape perceptions and priorities both inside and outside the Jewish community. As a number of still-stalwart foundations have closed their doors or entered into spend-down mode, and individuals of stature have begun to retreat from active philanthropy, the distinction between Jewish philanthropists and philanthropists who happen to be Jewish looms more important than ever.

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