

Jewish Youth Philanthropy: An Interpretive History of Our First Decade

By Rabbi Jonathan Spira-Savett

Commissioned by the Jewish Teen Funders Network for the
JTFN Leadership Conference on Jewish Youth Philanthropy
May 2007

Youth Philanthropy and Jewish Youth Philanthropy

Jewish youth philanthropy is a pretty obvious idea. Like calculus or the theory of evolution, more than one person hit on the notion independently. For a short time, I thought that I myself had invented it – to be precise, on the North Shore of Long Island in a bakery across the street from the Solomon Schechter High School in the spring of 1999. Fortunately, I quickly found out that many wise and experienced leaders were already engaged. I soon met Evan Mendelsohn, then the executive director of the Jewish Funders Network, who was already imagining a national project. Around the same time, the mail brought a packet from the Harold Grinspoon Foundation with their first national marketing for an idea called B'nai Tzedek.

Since the late 1990s, we have been able to think of Jewish youth philanthropy as a community, perhaps even a field. This paper tells the story of the first decade of that community, as a way of orientating us to the purposes, goals, and transformative possibilities of Jewish youth philanthropy. Rather than explore only the conceptual questions -- *What is youth philanthropy? What are the key objectives?* -- I want to shed light by touching on some key building-blocks in the story of our development as a community. We have been around long enough to have a “sacred history”, some common language, even some essential disagreements. This conference is premised on the idea that the community of Jewish youth philanthropy programs adds something down the line to the young people we meet and work with. *Their* highlights are not in this paper – one day soon, they need to outnumber adults as leaders and write their own grassroots history of what they have accomplished and how the experience has transformed them.

In *Changing the Face of Giving*, the 2001 report commissioned by the James Irvine Foundation (a must read for all of us), youth philanthropy is defined as programs **“in which youth develop knowledge of and participate in the formal practice of philanthropy, specifically grantmaking.”** For us, this means that our programs are distinct from the typical tzedakah education unit in a class, from a youth fundraising project, even from a bar or bat mitzvah “tzedakah project.”

One way to remind ourselves of the distinction is to look at the spark for youth philanthropy in the general community. In the late 1980s, the Michigan Council on Foundations, the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation launched the nation’s most sweeping youth philanthropy initiative. The overall goal was to multiply the number of local community foundations throughout the state of Michigan. To that end, the collaboration offered matching endowment funds, but required local recipients to set up Youth Advisory Committees which would oversee grantmaking for

youth-related needs. What the Michigan initiative did was to link at the very outset **increasing philanthropy in the community, incorporating youth voices into grantmaking, and development of a new generation of communal leadership.**

The Michigan plan recognized that there are multiple levels on which a community is changed through youth philanthropy. The most obvious targets are the **givers**. Young people learn about *issues*; they learn *skills* of leadership, research, presentation, and professionalism. They grapple with how to set *priorities*, individually and within a communal context. They face questions of *values and culture around wealth and power*, in a rich country and the particular setting of American Jewish community. They reflect on the *inner and relational dimensions* of being a giver – how to avoid becoming cynical, fatigued, or haughty toward those who receive their grants.

Beyond the giver, grants from young people of course make a difference to the **grantees**, the agencies and projects that are funded and their beneficiaries. But youth philanthropy also has the potential to affect the **organizations that run the program, the funders who support and work with the program, the individual change agents who spearhead the work**, and perhaps most significantly the **intergenerational dialogue about communal needs**. If we attend to all those levels, youth philanthropy becomes not simply a program, but the very culture of a Jewish community.

Pioneers

I have called this paper “an interpretive history.” This section isn’t a complete reckoning of the oldest programs or the largest. Each story here illuminates something unique about missions, motivations, or strategic planning.

The B’nai Tzedek Program of the Harold Grinspoon Foundation

In 1997, the philanthropist Harold Grinspoon launched B’nai Tzedek in partnership with the Jewish Endowment Foundation of Western Massachusetts to simultaneously address two needs of the Jewish community. First, he was worried about the future of funding for Jewish life in America and believed that efforts had to be made to educate a younger generation about the importance of Jewish philanthropy – and endowments in particular – to help ensure the future vibrancy of Jewish organizations. Second, he was alarmed at the growing evidence that a bar/bat mitzvah, rather than launching teens to a new level of Jewish engagement, was all too often the end of Jewish involvement for an ever growing proportion of Jewish youth. Consequently, Harold decided to create B’nai Tzedek to stimulate teens to begin a lifelong relationship with Jewish philanthropy. By now we are all familiar with the model, in which teens at the time of their Bar/Bat Mitzvah set aside a certain amount of money (in Western MA, \$125.00) which is matched by the Endowment/ Federation and/or a local donor, to create an endowment fund (in Western MA, \$500) in the teen’s name. Each year, teens allocate 5% (the anticipated interest) of the endowment to a local non-profit Jewish organization. Teens are encouraged to add money to the principal, thereby increasing the allocation amount. After twenty years, if the fund has not reached \$2500, it is rolled into the Endowment Foundation’s unrestricted fund; if it exceeds \$2500, it becomes a donor-advised fund.

In 1999, the Grinspoon Foundation began reaching out to communities around the country, offering the idea and model of B'nai Tzedek along with marketing materials, curriculum and technical support. In 2003, the project took a major leap when the foundation hired a national director to promote B'nai Tzedek. The national director, K'vod Weider, became a traveling consultant and Johnny Appleseed; to date, thirty-six communities have B'nai Tzedek programs (which they have tailored to suit their needs). In addition to promoting B'nai Tzedek, K'vod enhanced the local program by adding an educational component, weekend retreat and annual banquet; and then a youth foundation. Now directed by Gail Lansky, B'nai Tzedek continues to grow and expand.

The San Francisco Bay Area – From Idea to Infrastructure

In 1997 Michael Kesselman, then a program officer at the Koret Foundation in San Francisco, had a daughter approaching her Bat Mitzvah. Michael approached the other families in her class at the Brandeis-Hillel Day School with the idea now well-known as the Seventh Grade Fund. In place of gifts to each other, each bar/bat mitzvah would contribute to a central fund. Each student would receive one beautiful present from the pool, and the rest would be given as grants. Michael offered himself as the “professional” at the disposal of the Fund’s “board.”

Though the initial Brandeis-Hillel program itself continued only a couple of years, it inspired two other Bay Area institutions. At Temple Isaiah, a Reform congregation in Lafayette, CA, a young educator named Aaron Dorfman took on the idea for the synagogue setting in 1998. A few years later, Aaron wrote up the educational guide *Tzedakah in Action*, published by socialaction.com through an initial grant from the Walter and Elise Haas Fund. Among the goals of a Seventh Grade Fund he included **empowering young people**, and **redirecting resources from consumption to tikkun olam**.

The following year, Sue Schwartzman, a middle-school humanities teacher at the Mid-Peninsula Jewish Community Day School (now the Gideon Hausner Jewish Day School) adapted the model as an **integrated project, weaving together Jewish and General Studies as well as skills of research, analysis, and presentation**. Within a few years, Sue was consulting privately with several area day schools, encouraged and supported by philanthropist Laura Lauder, as well as several other Bay Area philanthropists.

Meanwhile, the Jewish Community Endowment Fund in San Francisco, under the professional leadership of Phyllis Cook and Judy Bloom, was researching best practices in youth philanthropy around the country. In 2004, they launched two regional youth foundations; a third has recently been established. Noteworthy was the **collaboration between two Federations** (San Francisco and East Bay) at the outset, and the **high multiyear funding** secured to establish each foundation. One of the regional youth foundations has already been endowed, and endowment funding is being sought for three new sites. Teens who have participated in a Seventh Grade Fund frequently apply for the high-school level youth foundations. One of them, 10th grader Rachel Levenson, has already moved through both “levels”, helped plan last year’s national conference, serves in an international capacity for USY, started her own philanthropic fund, and helps teach other teens about philanthropy.

The Endowment Fund has been able to hire Sue as the **full-time Director of Youth Philanthropy**. In this capacity she supervises coordinators for all the regional youth foundations, and consults with synagogues and day schools and will support the development of two new youth foundations in the Bay Area. This central office organizes an **annual in-town retreat** in which all the area youth foundations can participate. **Opportunities for alumni** are also in the works, and there are discussions about individual endowment funds for youth.

Community Youth Foundation – Jewish Community Foundation of San Diego

1997 seems to have been a watershed year for Jewish youth philanthropy. That year the Community Youth Foundation was established in San Diego, the first Jewish youth foundation organized within the communal system. In her introduction to the program manual Marjory Kaplan (CEO for the Jewish Community Foundation) writes: *When we first conceived the Community Youth Foundation in 1996, I thought it was a “nice-to-do-but-not-necessary” activity. Now, six years later, I see how absolutely vital the program is to our core values as a Foundation. Like many other communities, our philanthropic assets are growing. More families are participating in the Foundation. Still, 20-30-50 years from now, these assets will be meaningless unless there are caring, thoughtful and strong leaders to direct the grants.*

The path set by Marjory and Gail Littman (Director for Community Programs) puts **equal focus on the young giver and on the strategic imperative for the Jewish community to create a forum for engaging future givers**. Marjory’s words are carefully chosen. The Community Youth Foundation is not trying to duplicate today’s funders, but to generate new communal leaders attached to the community, grounded in Jewish principles, and able to address thoughtfully unseen challenges and needs as they present themselves in the future.

Jewish Youth Philanthropy Institute (Washington, DC Area)

JYPI is both a pioneer program and another case study in the strategic development of youth philanthropy in a community. Both dimensions stem from the vision and commitment of Barbara Gervis Lubran, JYPI’s founder, who has from the beginning applied the same vision at the national level and is co-chair of the Jewish Teen Funders Network. As Barbara was reflecting on what her children did and did not learn about tzedakah at the time they became B’nai Mitzvah, she read about B’nai Tzedek. She took the idea of an organized youth philanthropy program to her Federation and endowment fund. In the fall of 2000, the Jewish Youth Philanthropy Institute began as a youth foundation open to 8th and 9th graders, in partnership with the community teen initiative.

One programmatic innovation that has distinguished JYPI from the outset: **JYPI staff and volunteers prescreen potential grant applicants**, and then invite them to submit proposals. The process enables JYPI to expose teens to a range of nonprofits and communal needs, and to know from the outset that the proposals and site visits will be rich for the participants. JYPI leaves room for teens to nominate other nonprofits once the program begins.

Over time, JYPI has become, along with the Bay Area, a model of how to develop and extend the reach of a communal youth philanthropy initiative. In its

third year, JYPI added a youth foundation tailored to 10th-12th graders. In years 4-7, more groups have been added for both the older teens and the younger ones, to accommodate growing interest and to offer programs in different parts of the greater Washington area. There are about 120 teens involved in JYPI's youth philanthropy programs each year, and this year JYPI piloted its full-year alumni program.

From its inception, JYPI included **civic engagement** as part of its mission. JYPI organizes programs in the broader arena of community service, without diluting the focus on youth philanthropy. As part of that direction, JYPI offers minigrants to fund teen-organized community service projects. JYPI's own community service programs are intensive; one example is a trip to Central America with the American Jewish World Service.

No Small Change (New York City)

During 2000-2001, *Ma'yan: The Jewish Women's Project*, the Jewish Fund for Justice, and the Jewish Community Center in Manhattan cosponsored No Small Change, which brought together six teenage girls and six young female professionals. (One of the young adults was Stefanie Zelkind.) The idea grew out of a previous *Ma'yan* philanthropy project for young women spearheaded by Barbara Dobkin, who is widely known for spotlighting the particular dilemmas and dynamics that women face with regard to money and wealth. In No Small Change, all participants, youth and adults, contributed to a common pool at each meeting. More than most other projects, No Small Change trained a light on **values and feelings about wealth**; each meeting would begin with a "money check-in" sparked by a specific question. The manual for the program has been disseminated by 21/64, the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Foundation's intergenerational philanthropy project for families with wealth.

Rose Youth Foundation (Denver, CO)

Since 2001, Rose Youth Foundation has been for many of us the gold standard of a program that immerses its participants in the skilled practice of philanthropy. That focus is due to Lisa Farber Miller, senior program officer for Jewish Life grantmaking at Rose Community Foundation. Lisa often credits Gail Littman (San Diego) as an inspiration. The goals articulated by Rose for the youth foundation are some of the clearest in our field. Among them:

- **serve as an outreach tool to unaffiliated Jewish youth and increase understanding across denominations**
- empower Jewish youth to serve and interact with their community and educate and inform the youth involved about the needs and challenges of their community
- **broaden the Rose Community Foundation's grantmaking perspective**

A strong and disciplined emphasis on the **practice and language of strategic philanthropy** is one hallmark of the Rose Youth Foundation. **Youth development and empowerment** are at the core of RYF process. Youth run the meetings and are entirely responsible for making decisions about the mission, priorities, and grantmaking of their foundation. They grapple with what "Jewish grantmaking" means and have the final word. Teaching and coaching by Lisa and a Jewish educator ensure that **wisdom about grantmaking, Judaism, and teens is equally represented on the adult team.**

Rose Youth Foundation is fairly unique in that it is not communally sponsored; Rose Community Foundation does not partner with the Federation on the program. Lisa and her team are free to teach strategic grantmaking the way a foundation or private funder approaches it, and to help students approach needs free from the built-in advocacy of the communal system. Also unlike most Jewish youth foundations, RYF does not ask teens to contribute money to the grantmaking fund.

Jewish Community Foundation of Princeton-Mercer-Bucks (New Jersey-Pennsylvania)

The Jewish Community Youth Foundation of Princeton-Mercer-Bucks got off the ground in the fall of 2003. From the beginning, the program has been a collaboration among Ricky and A.J. Shechtel, the United Jewish Federation, and the Jewish Family and Children's Service, which houses and runs the program. Two things are distinctive about the program. First, **participants begin as a cohort in 8th grade and continue** through high school. Second, **each grade has a specific philanthropy focus:** local Jewish agencies (8th), national Jewish organizations (9th), Jewish culture (10th), Jewish political outreach and advocacy (11th), and Israel (12th and forthcoming).

From Programs to a Community

In 1999, a number of JFN members were talking, cross-fertilizing their local work, and starting to think about the national picture. JFN compiled a directory of local Jewish youth philanthropy programs. Lisa Farber Miller (Rose), Barbara Gervis Lubran (JYPI), and Gail Littman (San Diego) initially made sure that the annual JFN conference always had a session on youth philanthropy. Different projects and sources of expertise were highlighted each year, in the hope of catching the imagination of funders in new places. There was discussion of joint funding for a national effort through JFN, but the field wasn't quite ready for such an initiative at that time.

In 2004, there were discussions among the leaders of the Grinspoon Foundation, JFN, and the United Jewish Communities. The Grinspoon Foundation began to offer three-year matching grants of \$10,000 per year toward the salary of a part-time professional (to date, eleven communities have received the funding). At UJC, Iva Kaufman was exploring a role for the organization to play through its planned giving and endowments department and its family philanthropy project.

That winter, JFN convened a group of leading interested lay leaders and others for a daylong strategy session to explore a national initiative on youth philanthropy. The leadership left committed to a shared idea of a field that would somehow broaden and deepen through incentive funding, technical assistance, shared materials, and periodic gatherings. Over the following year that commitment began to bear fruit. A conference for the spring of 2006 for teens, their adult funders, and project directors was soon announced. Together, the Grinspoon Foundation, Barbara, Ricky, Rose Community Foundation, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, and the UJC sponsored the conference, co-chaired by K'vod and Ricky and coordinated by Gail Lansky. The Mayerson Foundation funded jphilanthropy.com, a first attempt to put a directory, resources, and a virtual Jewish youth philanthropy community on the Web. The directory lists 50+ local Jewish youth philanthropy programs across North America.

Serendipity put the 2006 Jewish Funders Network conference itself in Denver, home of the Rose Youth Foundation. Ten months out, a committee of teens and adults

from most of the pioneer programs gathered in Denver to map out the goals of a conference that would precede and overlap the main JFN gathering. The group continued to work by conference call throughout the year on programming for both teens and adults. The speaker lineup for the teens included Aaron Dorfman, now working as lead educator at the American Jewish World Service; Rabbi Sid Schwarz, founder of PANIM; and Yossi Abramowitz, one-time Jewish student activist and now social entrepreneur. More than 100 teens, representing 18 communities, attended. Among the national funders and leaders, the conference solidified commitments toward a national initiative.

In Spring 2006, Barbara and Ricky stepped forward as co-chairs for the Jewish Teen Funders Network, under the aegis of JFN. Stefanie Zelkind was hired in the summer of 2006, and we are now in the first steps of the initiative with this year's conference and the incentive grant program. In a couple of months, JTFN will launch an online resource center at jtfn.org with curricula and other educational materials, programmatic resources and how-to guides, as well as a directory of local programs. Serving as a central address for Jewish youth philanthropy, JTFN's primary goals are to strengthen and grow the field of Jewish youth philanthropy, and to enhance the educational value of new and existing programs.

A Fad or a Field?

In other endeavors, a field is defined among other things by an agreed-upon base of knowledge, common standards of excellence, some mechanism for training, and a community that advances and builds the field. To become a true field, we will have to address:

- *Goals and standards* – as a basis for planning, evaluation, receiving technical assistance and incentive funding
- *Common language* – Jewish, philanthropic, youth development
- *Training and a community of learning* – who guides, or how do we guide each other, to put to use the wisdom and knowledge gathered so far

There are challenges to becoming a field. Our dialogue will sharpen as we surface our different assumptions and goals. Accountability – to standard of excellences, to funders, and to each other – builds on but also challenges our warm collegiality. I have long thought that youth philanthropy could be our domestic “birthright Israel”, if we keep our eyes on these dimensions of building a true field. How we do that is the next challenge for the second decade of Jewish youth philanthropy.