A Qualitative Analysis of Contributors to Jewish Philanthropies

Gary A. Tobin

This paper analyzes trends in the attitudes and behavior of American Jews who contribute to Jewish philanthropies. Using research methods, a variety of areas have been explored, including motivations for giving, deterrents to giving, the role of Israel, and responses to Jewish organizations and agencies. This paper does not include analyses of non-givers, who now constitute a major part of the American Jewish community. The focus is on givers, those who tend to be more involved in Jewish life.

Qualitative data gathered through focus groups and personal interviews comprised the data base. Givers to Jewish philanthropies in various ranges (e.g., $1,000 to $5,000, $10,000 to $25,000 and above) have been examined. In all, almost 100 focus groups have been conducted. In addition, more than 100 interviews were conducted with givers of at least $1,000 throughout the country. All of the focus groups and interviews were transcribed for subsequent analysis. The data were collected between 1988 and 1993.

Motivations for Giving

Even among those who are uninvolved in either synagogue life or in major roles in Jewish organizations, most givers have a strong core Jewish identity. This identity could be expressed in any number of ways including feelings about antisemitism, support for Israel, a love of Jewish learning, or a statement that "I am proud to be Jewish" or "I feel that it is important to be Jewish." Many of the givers strongly differentiate between being Jewish and being a "religious Jew." "Religious" to most connotes being a synagogue attendee and observing many Jewish rituals. Some express regret that they are not more religious by this definition, but others were openly hostile to defining a good Jew as a religious Jew. Many go out of their way to indicate that they do not need to belong to a synagogue or keep kosher in order for them to feel good about themselves as Jews. On the other hand, some believe that they have missed out for themselves and their children in not being more religiously Jewish. In either case, the core identity and pride in being a Jew is characteristic.

Therefore, nearly all of the givers believe that assimilation, loss of Jewish identity, and lack of Jewish education are the most important problems facing American Jewry today. They are deeply concerned about the possible disappearance of American Jewry into the mainstream of the host Christian culture. Some believe this possibility is due primarily to a lack of Jewish education, some believe it is the removal from generational ties to old-world Judaism, while some believe the cause is intermarriage. Many believe that assimilation poses a major threat to contemporary American Jewry. This sometimes translates into support for Jewish education and related programs.

Most givers reveal a strong attachment to Jewish life and identity in some way. Non-involvement in Jewish organizations and philanthropy cannot be explained by hostility to Judaism or by a desire to avoid participation in Jewish life. Indeed, looking at the issues of assimilation, Israel, ritual observance, Jewish education, and so on, most respondents demonstrate a commitment to Judaism and a strong sense of their own identity. Part of that identity is continued concern about antisemitism and the resurgence of antisemitism. This is an underlying theme in discussing the relative safety and security of American Jews today. Nevertheless, when a probing question was asked — "Which is more of a threat today, antisemitism or assimilation?" — most agreed that assimilation was a more important problem today.

Overall, it is not the threat of loss of identity that motivates giving. Donors give to Jewish philanthropy because of a sense of obligation and responsibility to the Jewish people. For many it is reflexive and innate, and a key element in both individual and Jewish identity. Many feel that because they are fortunate they are especially obligated to help others. Giving makes them feel good. Status, reward, and peer group influences may serve as reinforcing factors, but only in a context where the donor already feels a personal sense of accomplishment. Most individuals give because they feel obligated to the Jewish community and not because they are fulfilling an obligation to God or achieving a path to heaven.

There is a general feeling among older givers that they have a responsibility — especially those who have accumulated considerable assets — to "put something back into the community." While they are concerned with leaving some support for their children, many of them also have concerns about leaving a charitable legacy to the community, and particularly to the Jewish community. These feelings come less out of what they define as a religious obligation to God and more as a "pay back" for the good lives that they lead. Many feel fortunate and lucky and wish to express their gratitude by leaving some legacy to the community.

Most of the givers indicated that they are capable of donating far more to philanthropies than they are currently giving. Some are not giving more because they have not been asked for more, others because they choose to spread their charitable giving among many organizations because they cannot decide what to give to, or they believe that there are many worthwhile causes. Others have not given more because they do not understand the purposes for which the money is

being raised. Some individuals are giving to their maximum capacity, given their current income and accumulated wealth.

The concept of an umbrella organization for giving is extremely important to many donors. They do not like to be solicited by many different Jewish organizations. They have some faith that the allocation process is a good one, and that leadership and those who are involved in distributing funds are knowledgeable and fair in their allocations. While some might want more money to go to local services and some would prefer more to Israel, they do not want to experience what they perceive as ensuring chaos if some central organization were not collecting and distributing the money. While they understand the need for fund-raising dinners and separate kinds of fund-raisers for capital campaigns for specific organizations, they do not want to be solicited by every Jewish organization.

Most givers are inclined to support a wide variety of programs within the Jewish community, but their lack of knowledge, involvement and contact with Jewish fundraising institutions are primarily deterrents to more giving. Givers do not know enough about the services, the agencies, and the programs offered in the Jewish community. Among those who contribute $1,000 per year or more, many philanthropists know little about service delivery systems and the institutions that provide those services within their own Jewish communities.

Most givers do not have a giving plan, either annual or long term and much of the giving is ad hoc. Most givers are unwilling to say what proportion of their income — 2%, 5%, 10%, or more — should be allocated for philanthropies, either Jewish or non-Jewish. They are unwilling to set standards for *tzedakah*, but say that they give what they can afford Since philanthropy is part of an ad hoc budgetary process, it is viewed much as are other consumer-oriented decisions. An awareness of the standards of *tzedakah* appears to be lacking in most givers. When pressed about what people should give, noting that percentages are "wrong," most say under 5%. A good many say under 1%, and not an insignificant number say nothing. When asked to set standards regarding what an equitable gift might be by dollar amount, most givers are reluctant to do so and, indeed, are almost all opposed to doing so. Equitable giving is often judged by what others are giving. Therefore, most feel that they are giving a "good" donation, even if "good" can not be defined.

Some younger Jews measure their capacity not by their salaries, which are often high, but by more limited assets. They evaluate their giving ability not only according to their current high earning capacity, but also on the basis of their potential in the future. Since most younger Jews do not have large assets, certainly not "mega-fortunes" like some of the leaders in the Jewish community, they want to limit their giving. Some are also concerned about the longevity of their high earning capacity, viewing their current earnings as somewhat tenuous. Since some are worried about the future, they are concerned about not over-extending themselves by current giving. Furthermore, many feel that they have major obligations to family as well as their other philanthropic responsibilities.

Some older givers, however, even those with a net worth between five to fifteen million dollars or more, do not feel themselves to be in a position to make

substantial contributions to philanthropies. Some are worried about their assets being depleted before their lives are over. Many grew up in the depression and have seen fortunes disappear. Therefore, there is a great fear about being too generous or what might be conceived as being irresponsible in giving away large amounts of money before they pass away. Some fear that they will become dependent upon the support of their children or the community-at-large.

Nearly all of the givers say that they could give much more to a Jewish philanthropy if they believed strongly enough in the purpose. The most frequently stated reason was an emergency in Israel if its security were threatened. Services for the elderly was another major possibility, as were capital facilities, if they were seen to be in the right place and a necessity for the Jewish community. Givers would also donate more if the purpose were better understood, that is, if they had more information, more direct contact with recipients, and a better sense of how their money was to be spent.

But big givers do not like to be too far out in front of other givers in terms of the size of their gift. They look for parity among the largest givers and express some resentment toward undergivers or non-givers. A large gift far and above the current giving level is necessary to establish higher plateaus. When asked if they could double their yearly gifts, most givers indicated that they could do so for an emergency. Most agreed that their lifestyle was not seriously influenced or affected by current giving levels. Donors could give more and would give more if the need were demonstrated. Support for Israel is often seen as such a need.

The Role of Israel

Donating money to support Israel has been a cornerstone of American Jewish philanthropy for decades and in many ways this support has been reflexive. Jews who witnessed the horrors of the Holocaust and the miracle of Israel's birth developed deep and strong emotional ties to Israel. First and second generation Jews are linked to Israel as birthing partners, bonded by a difficult and yet exultant history. Their philanthropic behavior is rooted in tragedy and redemption.

American Jews express their support for Israel in many ways. Jewish organizations are active advocates of Israel. Many Jews who buy State of Israel Bonds, visit Israel, and support elected officials who are sympathetic to Israel, also donate money to organizations which send funds there. Indeed, a sophisticated and efficient fundraising apparatus has been developed to organize Jewish philanthropy on behalf of Israel. Support for Israel is the most clearly understood role of many Jewish organizations.

Israel remains the strongest motivating factor for most Jews in their decision to give, and for them it is a visceral component of their Jewish identity. While some have questions about Israeli government policies, or dissatisfaction with the economic system there, the support is very strong and can translate into both annual giving and the funding of special projects. Generational differences are apparent.

For younger Jews, still in the family-raising period of their life cycle, local Jewish organizations, including the Jewish Community Center, are often of more interest.

Most givers feel a deep attachment to Israel itself, to the principles of American Jewish support for it, and to its place in American Jewish identity. However, few believe that they have to move to Israel to demonstrate their support, and they feel a sense of American Jewish strength and importance as well. Philanthropy is a form of "temporary aliyah" for many.

A general fear of "right-wing extremist" control in Israel is of major concern to many givers. Some say flatly that if the law of return were changed they would stop supporting Israel in terms of monetary gifts. Others said that even this would not change their financial support, although they would be very upset and feel betrayed. Other issues of "right-wing" control elicit similar responses.

The vast majority of givers approved all measures of support, such as arms sales to Israel, economic aid, sending U.S. troops if Israel's security is threatened, and support for organizations which provide educational or social services in Israel. The strongest approval among all givers is for economic aid and organizations providing education or social services in Israel.

Support for Israel remains strongest among individuals over the age of 55. They are the most devoted to the State and see it as an integral part of Jewish life. They also see Israel as a haven for Jews worldwide, including those from the United States, if necessary. Some have been supporters of Israel since its inception and are devoted to the financial, military, economic, and social success of the State.

There is growing concern about Israel's future and about the role that American Jews play in its support; many individuals are making decisions about how much, and in what ways they should support Israel. Many givers often think and talk about Israel, and some have relatives there. News about Israel is obtained through the *New York Times*, on national television and through a variety of other sources. While support for Israel remains strong among the most involved givers, the nature of that support is changing. Israel is no longer viewed through rose-colored glasses; nevertheless, it continues to provoke a deeply positive emotional response. The State is loved, even with its imperfections. The support for Israel may be voiced as unconditional, but givers have sent clues that are contradictory. While few could envision a time when they would not support Israel, some have said that they would seriously assess their donations, how they view Israel, and the levels of their support, should the right wing control Israel and make changes that they deem unacceptable.

Younger givers are somewhat more likely to view financial support for Israel as an option rather than an imperative. The Holocaust and birth of Israel are much more distant historical events for younger Jews. Third, fourth and fifth generation Jews now comprise a large majority of American Jewry. Their attitudes and, therefore, philanthropic behaviors are influenced by a different history. The war in Lebanon, the Intifada, and the "Who is a Jew?" issue is as salient to younger Jews as the birth of Israel or even the Six-day war.

The effects of age differences are apparent. Younger givers are much more likely to indicate that Israel is not as important in their lives as it was in the lives of their older counterparts. Thus, while overall levels of support remain strong, they are definitely weakening among younger Jews.

Conclusion

Many givers are largely detached from involvement in Jewish organizational life. Knowledge, participation, and interest are fairly limited for most. Some of the lack of involvement is due to competing needs and interests of the non-Jewish world. Many have particular interests and obligations to be good citizens and participate in a wide range of communal activities. Many have extremely busy work schedules. Families and young children require attention and care. Therefore, competing interests of all kinds pose severe time constraints. Many, however, participate actively in human service, cultural, educational and other organizations in the non-Jewish world, so that the lack of more active participation in the Jewish community signifies the failure of the organized Jewish community to successfully compete for time and attention.

This failure can be attributed to a number of factors. The first is the simplest: most individuals were never asked to participate. Despite requests for gifts, few efforts have been made to include them on boards, committees, or events in the Jewish community. Other organizations are much more aggressive in asking individuals to participate. Second, the Jewish community has failed to nurture these individuals in any serious way. They are solicited once a year and this solicitation constitutes the only contact for some, and certainly the contact that forms the greatest impression for the rest. Third, little is generally known of Jewish organizational life.

Jewish organizations need to reinforce individuals' feelings of their obligations as Jews to support Jewish philanthropies. The meaning of *tzedakah,* why it is so special for Jews to give, and why Jews have always given are appealing themes. The distinction between giving to Jewish versus non-Jewish organizations, the idea of caring for one's own, and the question who will help the Jews if they do not help themselves, are important issues to many Jews.

More education about *tzedakah* at all giving levels is required. Currently, there are no standards by which to judge how large a gift should be, and setting standards that seem to be arbitrary and personal are resented. Therefore, traditional education about *tzedakah,* the roots of *tzedakah* in Jewish heritage, and so on, are essential. Last, individuals need to know more about the agencies, the purposes, the programs, and the people served by gifts to Jewish philanthropies.

In the history of fundraising, the role of Israel is critical in the quantum leap toward larger giving for most donors. The greatest increases come almost exclusively through missions to Israel. According to the history of these givers, missions remain the single greatest inspiration for increased giving. However, here too there are problems. For frequent mission attendees, there was some element of

cynicism and burnout. They said that "It's the same old show, and we want something different." But the desire was for improved organizational visits to Israel.

Organizational missions are the primary means of increasing commitment to giving. Many have said that either the total mission experience or a specific event on a mission was the turning point in their Jewish philanthropic career. Several indicated that the mission had been their most important or most meaningful experience, and that it deepened and perpetuated their commitment to Jewish philanthropy. A number of individuals said that the emotional and intellectual impact of the mission was the *"cement"* for their future Jewish philanthropic behavior.

Missions are the most effective motivators for giving. More individuals need to be brought to Israel as a means to reinforce Jewish identity and giving. Education about *tzedakah* needs to be linked to greater involvement with Israel.