

Jim Joseph Foundation Madrichim Narrative
Lisa Eisen, National Director, Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation

As a community, we often look for the next big idea—a proposal so dramatic it will create a paradigm shift that will positively impact the trajectory of Jewish life. But as our co-founder and visionary leader Charles Schusterman (z"l) frequently told us, there is nothing new under the sun. In considering the future of Jewish education, we would do well to keep this principle in mind.

Rather than seeking a new idea, Jewish funders—including the Jim Joseph Foundation (JJF), Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation and many others—should ensure the Jewish education ecosystem is robust and healthy enough to enable the investments we have already made and the big ideas we have seeded to take root and succeed.

This is not to say we should be complacent or unimaginative. Quite the contrary. Creative thinking and innovative approaches have a key role to play in the vital systemic change work that will allow our ideas to flourish, our reach to broaden and our impact to endure.

Now is the time to focus on reclaiming and reworking existing assets and repairing the system in which we are currently educating and shaping the identity of young Jews. As we have seen through Birthright Israel, even the greatest ideas will not reach their fullest potential when operating in a system ill-equipped to support them.

Indeed, the onus is on all of us as funders committed to achieving profound and lasting impact in Jewish life to move beyond programmatic grantmaking. It is time we work in the more challenging interstitial areas in which only our collective efforts can achieve large-scale change. Simply put: we have a responsibility to use our vast resources—human, financial and otherwise—in ways others simply cannot and will not.

Catalytic philanthropy is built upon the recognition that while grantmaking is important, changing systems is the most effective way to find solutions to entrenched communal and societal issues. JJF is well positioned to take a lead role in catalyzing systemic change in Jewish education.

It has already made game-changing investments, significantly increasing the number of high-quality formal and informal educational opportunities. It has generously supported a well-calibrated portfolio of new and existing initiatives for educators and young people alike, as well as pioneered field-building platforms influencing the entire spectrum of programs reaching young Jews. Its grants to day schools and the seminaries will shape the education of new generations of young Jewish adults, and those to the Foundation for Jewish Camp, Moishe House, Hillel, BBYO, Repair the World and the iCenter, among many others, are expanding the number of young people involved in and creating new forms of Jewish learning that promise to strengthen the Jewish future.

And so, our big idea for JJF is not a new one, but we believe it is the most important. JJF should reinvigorate the system in which young Jews are nurtured, educated and inspired to lead vibrant Jewish lives. Foundations can catalyze systemic change in a number of ways, and here are three in particular JJF is well positioned to consider.

1) Bring Innovation into the Mainstream: Ideas that can regenerate a field or community often blossom outside of the system in which they are designed to operate. Far too many of these ideas never find their way into the mainstream where they can be adapted, replicated and ultimately taken to scale.

So it is with Jewish life, particularly in the field of young adult education. Over the last decade, we have witnessed the phenomenon of the Birthright generation, in which hundreds of thousands of young Jews—many previously unengaged—are returning from this eye-opening experience with a connection to Israel, a sense of belonging to a global Jewish community, and a hunger for opportunities to channel their newfound excitement into meaningful Jewish lives.

As the existing Jewish institutions have struggled to effectively engage them, we have seen the explosive growth of the Jewish “innovation ecosystem,” bolstered by new social networking technology and supported by incubator programs such as Bikkurim, Jewish New Media Innovation Fund, Joshua Venture, Present Tense, Reboot and the ROI Community.

This ecosystem has at its core young Jewish social entrepreneurs who are creating relevant Jewish experiences, programs and networks, and inspiring their peers to participate.

The challenge now, however, is to bring innovators and interventions incubated outside of the community into the mainstream, where they have the potential to find more reliable sources of funding and reach many more young Jews. With its vast influence in Jewish education and strong credibility and connections in the innovation sector, JJF can be at the forefront of infusing the ideas and work of young Jewish innovators into schools, camps, youth groups, campuses and communities where young people learn and grow.

By focusing on the nexus between peer-driven ideas and reach, resources and scale, JJF can ensure that new talent and approaches continually reinforce and reignite their existing investments in broad-scale education programs. How might such ideas reimagine the possibilities of keeping hundreds of thousands of Birthright alumni actively engaged with Jewish life and with Israel? How might they help transform Limmud into an international movement linking young Jewish adults through diverse and dynamic Jewish discourse? How might they help foster new networks of young Jews empowered to shape Jewish learning according to their own interests and to create Jewish life in their own image?

A recent study from the Institute for Jewish and Community Research shows that Jewish foundations are committed to supporting both communal institutions and innovative programming. But it is not enough to fund each independently of the other. By actively facilitating interaction between and integration of these efforts to engage young Jewish adults, we can create one holistic system that empowers young Jews to be co-creators of a vibrant Jewish future.

2) Drive toward Collective Impact: Building a holistic system and fostering communal change requires more than individual interventions working in isolation. They demand resources to fill the gaps and link the silos between organizations and programs, allowing broad-scale cross-sector coordination, communication and collaboration to take hold among them. We have seen the power of the collective impact approach in a variety of fields.

Having established itself as the most influential philanthropic player in the Jewish education system, JJF should take the lead in bringing all of the key stakeholders—including practitioners, experts, advocates and current and potential funders—to the table to collectively reorganize the Jewish education system around a common agenda and unified set of outcomes consistently measured.

In doing so, JJF could pioneer a model similar to that of Strive, a public education reform initiative in Cincinnati, where 300 community leaders spanning the public, private, government, policy and advocacy sectors have put aside individual agendas to adopt a collective approach to improving student achievement. Aligning their efforts, outcomes and metrics across the educational continuum, they have improved student success in key areas, including high school graduation.

One area in particular where this work is of urgent and immense importance is Israel education. As Israel's legitimacy and existence as a Jewish state are increasingly threatened and the ties of young Jews to Israel as a central focus of Jewish identity and peoplehood are increasingly tenuous, we need all philanthropic and communal partners to focus on returning Israel to the heart of Jewish life and learning from the pre-collegiate level to the university and beyond.

While Israel education is now attracting the attention of key stakeholders in the community, the hard work of aligning resources, methods and measurement around a shared vision remains. Our goal ought to be nothing short of ensuring that all young Jews, including hundreds of thousands of Birthright alumni, have the opportunity to learn about, appreciate and support Israel as the Jewish homeland, a key ally of the United States and a legitimate modern state contributing meaningfully to the betterment of our world.

JJF has already been at the vanguard of this work, and it should continue to lead in this area. At the pre-collegiate level, JJF partnered with our Foundation to launch the iCenter, dedicated to reinventing Israel education and to creating a continuum of innovative, effective Israel experiences throughout the Jewish educational system. Its local work with BASIS, which brought together 11 day schools to focus on shared outcomes and collective impact, is ripe with potential to be replicated and scaled on a national level.

We need to build on what we have started, weaving together a network of programs and organizations that expand opportunities for young people to engage with and explore modern Israel, its rich history, diverse society and fertile cultural landscape. And we need to focus on developing a multi-faceted field of Israel studies, where young people in high school, college and beyond can learn about modern Israel with the thoughtfulness and intellectual rigor it deserves.

3) Push on a Lever for Change: One of the most potent ways to achieve impact is to look for the leverage point in the gears that drive the entire system and concentrate attention and resources there. Pushing intensely on that lever can "unstuck" the system and create a chain reaction of change.

In the Jewish community, that lever is leadership. We are facing a leadership crisis in which many of our current executives are struggling to adapt to 21st century needs, and there is a dearth of bold, effective leaders coming up in the ranks ready to take over the reins. Quality Jewish leaders are essential to creating compelling, enriching Jewish experiences for young people. The ripple effect is clear: leaders galvanize the influencers and advocates who galvanize the masses of people, creating a virtuous cycle in which great leaders beget great programs that inspire more great leaders. Without strong leadership, the Jewish ecosystem will stagnate and our program investments will be for naught.

Only by investing mightily both in cultivating top leadership and in nurturing young talent will we ensure that our community is able to engage the next generation in meaningful Jewish life and learning. We need to take a two-pronged approach to this work. First, make careers in the Jewish community more attractive and offer professional development, trainings, mentoring, coaching and peer networks that provide professionals with the skills, resources and support they need to create change from within. Second, develop a leadership pipeline that invests in rising stars—both professional and lay—and recruits top secular and business leaders to deploy their talents in Jewish life, whether on short-term assignment or meaningful career change.

Thinking expansively, JJF should help reinvent the schools of Jewish communal leadership that are failing or, better yet, create a fully accredited, degree-granting institution of higher learning for pursuing careers and leadership roles in Jewish life, ideally highly subsidized or tuition-free. Whether an independent initiative or a college within a larger university, such an enterprise can attract promising talent and help a new generation build skills, create networks and prepare the next cohort of executive leadership.

Birthright generation. Israel education. Great leadership. Our **BIG** idea is for JJF is to focus its human and financial capital on these three critical areas. By infusing innovation into the mainstream to better engage young Jewish adults, by forging a shared vision and healthy ecosystem for Jewish and Israel education, and by pushing on the lever of leadership, JJF can achieve broad-scale and enduring impact with its grantmaking and revitalize the education system responsible for nurturing the Jewish journeys of young adults.

JJF has quickly become the most influential player in Jewish education and built a reputation as a serious and professional organization, one that our Foundation is proud to work with as close partners and friends. Now is the time for JJF to leverage its vast resources and credibility to foster a flourishing, self-regenerating Jewish young adult ecosystem that organically links together all parts in service of the whole and continually adapts to and thrives in the evolving pace and space in which we live.

This approach to systemic change requires more than smart funding and replicating programs. It demands time, patience and a willingness not just to invest in big ideas but also in the people and infrastructure that sustain them. It is hard, messy and often not particularly glamorous work. But it is also the optimum way—some might argue the only way—to yield tangible, lasting community-wide impact.

And so before we go seeking the next silver bullet or panacea for engaging and educating young Jews, let us focus on securing our current investments and revitalizing the systems we already have in place, creating a cohesive, intentional model of Jewish community in which all roads lead to the same end: ensuring vibrant, enduring Jewish life for generations to come.