



MEMORANDUM

Date: September 4, 2012
To: Board of Directors of the Jim Joseph Foundation
From: Jeffrey Solomon

Friends,

I'm so sorry that I will not be able to be with you in October. I remember fondly the first *Madrichim* gathering and believe that these deliberations are sacred labor, to be cherished.

I am going to have the chutzpah to tweak your question, "What is your 'big idea' for the future of Jewish education?" I do so because I do not believe that there aren't many big ideas. I do believe that the big ideas are in front of us all the time and that we don't engage seriously enough in developing our theories of change and behavior, enabling us to capture and exploit those big ideas. I want to do an analysis of Birthright Israel, which has become the paradigm of a big new Jewish idea. It isn't. It is simply a disruptive technology with regard to a very old, very solid notion of taking young people to Israel. The analysis that led to this disruptive technology is worth noting simply because it suggests a way that the JJF might evaluate ideas and concepts.

What were the disruptions?

Age

The classic age that was the focus of Israel trips was that of high school. This did not take into account the changes that have taken place in developmental psychology over the past three decades, which suggest that identity formation takes place far later in adulthood than was earlier thought. The change made by Birthright also recognizes that it is the "G-d squad," those families that have a commitment to Judaism that have aligned parents and children who will resonate with an Israel trip. Changing to the age group 18-26 was a statement about both of these issues and achieved one of its great objectives, that of reaching the "marginalized" young Jew. It also operated with a self-confidence that mirrored the self-confidence of this generation.

Organizing principles

One of the five core principles of Birthright was that it would operate on a market-driven basis; too much organized Jewish life has the lassitude of monopolies. By having not-for-profit and for-profit educational organizations compete, there was a strive for higher quality and greater creativity on the part of the trip organizers. Inherent in this decision was for the Birthright

organization to be a franchisor; establishing standards maintaining quality assurance and using financing as the organizing tool. Here again, the fealty was to the principles that were implicit in Birthright, having participants increase their Jewish identity, their connection to Israel and their connection to the Jewish people. With that at the center, there was no organizational loyalty that had to be considered. When Hillel leadership came to the nascent Birthright organization and said 'we can run it', they were told 'you can be one of the trip organizers and to the degree that you are successful, you will have a greater or lesser share of that'. Fealty to mission over fealty to organization is an important lesson that I think can and should be replicated in the work of JJF.

Length of trip

At the time that Birthright was founded, the average trip length was six weeks. This certainly did not fit within the lifestyle of most Jewish families with teens in North America. Consequently those who had been going on Israel trips were those who had engaged in Jewish camping or synagogue youth group life. They were from the inner circle. The creation of a ten-day trip was considered a joke by most commentators, yet along with the length of the trip was an intensity in the educational objectives and standards so that behind the curtain there was a seriousness that had the trip's impact far greater than that of trips many times its length.

Evaluation

One of the five core principles was that evaluation shall be part of the core budget of Birthright. The learning, both in the formal evaluation of Birthright and in the many doctoral dissertations and other academic pursuits regarding Birthright, is today greater than any other area of Jewish education. Understanding impact is a critical component of the work of Birthright Israel and should be (and in the case of JJF is), a critical component of all work that we support.

Implications for JJF

While I could go on with other technological disruptions created by Birthright, the limitations of space require that I focus on the implications of this for JJF. I wish to encourage you to be bolder, but to do so based on strategic clarity. Decide the two or three or four major objectives you would like to achieve in Jewish education and then focus on those along the following triad:

- Provisions: what are the provisions of the programs that you think can achieve these objectives? There must be an absolute alignment between the provisions of the program and the objectives you are trying to achieve. The depth of thinking through the necessary tactics to support your strategies is the responsibility of the foundation, not of your potential partners.
- Delivery systems: I would encourage JJF to think about the panoply of Jewish organizations as potential delivery systems for the provisions of your strategy. It is a difficult way of thinking about many of the legacy organizations that you have thus far supported. However, one of the choices that I don't think the foundation has made yet is whether you wish to support dynamic programs that can improve Jewish life or whether

you want to support institutions that serve the Jewish community. You are trying to do both which limits your impact. A hard-hitting strategy would not allow compromise in answering that question.

- Financing mechanisms: I want to recognize and congratulate JJF on its role in the major financing of the next phase of the Moishe House Development. I believe second-stage financing is an enormous opportunity that warrants expansion. However, I would remind us of the core lesson of Tom Tierney and Joel Fleishman's new book on strategic philanthropy, "Fewer, Larger, Longer." While you have made big bets to date, I would encourage bigger bets, but bigger bets that are tied to those strategic objectives that you've identified. (Before its spend-down, ACBP had assets of approximately fifteen percent of those of JJF, yet it risked \$8 million spent in six months as risk capital for Birthright Israel, and with future commitments is approaching \$100 million of support.)

I believe that there are many such opportunities for JJF and look forward to participating with you as you continue to strive for a stronger, more welcoming, more dynamic Jewish community.