

RESPONSE TO THE JIM JOSEPH FOUNDATION

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THE QUESTIONS

Years ago I did a fellowship in public policy where, in essence, we spent a year learning how to ask the right questions. Given that asking questions has long been the Jewish way of doing things, I thought I would begin to address the questions set forth by the Jim Joseph Foundation by adding a few of my own.

- What do we really mean when we say Jewish education (education about what for what end)?
- Who are young Jews today? What are their lives like? What do they care about? How do they spend their time? Who and what influences them? What place does “Jewish” have in their lives and the lives of their families?
- Where are the lever points where a targeted amount of funding can have the most impact? Where are the areas/efforts currently in the field that are already showing promise and with additional funding can have an even more widespread and/or deep impact?
- Who are the people most worth investing in? How do we help encourage thoughtful investigation, honest reflection, creativity, and excellence? How do we sustain those who are doing important work and how do we bring new thinking and people to those areas which have become stale?
- How does the Foundation create a funding strategy where the sum of your giving adds up to more than the individual grants you will make over time?

Lest you think I have answers for all these questions, let me say now that in addition to learning how to ask better questions, my fellowship also taught me to know what I don't know. So given that I am by no means an expert in Jewish education nor a direct practitioner in the field, let me focus on what I have learned over the years at the Righteous Persons Foundation. First, to fund well, one must understand the landscape in which one funds and second, at the end of the day, it is always about investing in good people.

I. THE LANDSCAPE

As has been written by so many before me, we live in a time where Jews, with few exceptions, are totally integrated and immersed into American society. Therefore, to understand the realities of young Jews today, one has to understand the realities of what it is to be young in America. Today's young people live in a world full of media --30 million plus websites, hundreds of cable channels, thousands of consumer magazines, 10,000 plus radio stations, and over 100,000 newly published books each year.¹ 87% of those between the ages of 12 and 17 are online,² with internet use (excluding email) surpassing TV watching, talking on the phone, and reading.³

What are they doing while they are “plugged in?” Increasingly they are contributing to what *Wired* Magazine has called the “Age of Peer Production.”⁴ According to *Wired*'s Editor in Chief, Chris Anderson, the Information Age is quickly moving into an era where “armies of amateurs are happy to work for free.” Young people are part of a growing number who are populating the web with user-generated content -- 100 million web pages for MySpace; 40 million bloggers (13 percent of online youth now publish their own blog); nearly a million amateur encyclopedians (just take a look at Wikipedia.com); tens of millions of customer reviews on Amazon; numerous photo and video

sharing sites (YouTube now claims 70 million people watching original video clips submitted by other users each day); and the list goes on.

This dramatic shift is based on a democratic understanding of talent and knowledge. Writes Anderson, “Companies are not just exploiting free labor; they’re also creating the tools that give voice to millions... [This new sort of company] understands talent exists outside of Hollywood, that credentials matter less than passion, and that each of us has knowledge that’s valuable to someone, somewhere.”

Life in this democratic, actively plugged in world is not without its pressures. In addition to being fully wired, life as a young person also means being fully stressed. Major concerns, like getting into college, are no longer limited to junior and senior high school students. Pre-occupation with college admission, research found, is now prevalent in twelve and thirteen year olds.⁵ Once they make it into college, youths have other pressures. The majority of 18-25 year olds say they are “very worried” or “worried” about finding a job after graduation; just over half about getting good grades; and one third “very worried” about getting a sexually transmitted disease.⁶ Add to this the fact that this is a generation coming of age post 9/11 -- amid terror attacks, random crime sprees, numerous natural disasters, and their country at war.

While in the past, many individuals looked to institutions and religion to make sense of the world around them, this generation is more likely to rely on their family and social networks. These networks, according to pollster Anna Greenberg, are increasingly diverse. More than sixty percent of young Jews say their friendship circles are comprised of mostly non-Jews (with only 13 percent reporting that all of their friends are Jewish).⁷ In addition, young Jews are growing up in an increasingly diverse country where they are less willing to align themselves with a particular religious denomination (pluralism is on the rise) and more likely to practice their faith “informally.” While young Jews (and American youth in general) still view their religion and culture, as important,⁸ they experience religion as one of multiple factors shaping identity.

So what, then, does this changing landscape mean for Jewish identity in general and Jewish education in particular? First we need to re-assess what we are trying to achieve. Second, media needs to be a part of the strategy. Third, a balanced portfolio needs to include funding of limited-term, intensive experiences.

A. Re-asses what the end point is that we are trying to achieve

Jewishness is competing in a crowded field – in terms of people’s time, interest, and sense of identity and community. The assumption that with the right educational opportunities and experiences, the majority of Jewish youth will go on to see their Jewishness as their dominant and primary identity, that they will associate primarily with other Jews and marry another Jew, is based on a flawed and outdated understanding of what it means to be Jewish in America today. If those are the goals, then I think even \$20 million a year will do little to turn the American tide.

Yet if it is not a life of Jewish primacy, then what are we trying to achieve? Perhaps the goal of Jewish education is to equip youth with the age-old tools, questions, and a base from which to navigate the complexity of their lives – as Jews and as human beings. Here I will use that often quoted teaching of Rabbi Hillel: “If I am not for myself, then who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?” Most young Jews experience their Jewishness as the first question. They see a community that seems insular, fearful, distrusting, and interested only

in its own concerns. While surely an incomplete portrayal, that is the image of the Jewish community that most presents itself to the public.

But it is the struggle to balance these two values – the universal and the particular – that is most reflective of and relevant to where most American Jewish youth are today. Multiple identities do not mean that one’s Jewishness is unimportant or needs to be superficial. In fact Greenberg’s research discovered that young Jews feel very positive about being Jewish. Yet, they have a difficult time articulating what their connection to their Jewishness means. Thus, there is an important opportunity (and need) to help young Jews better understand their connection to their Jewishness (vs. mandating what that connection must be). This discovery, however, is best understood and explored in connection to their daily and universal lives, rather than in a vacuum.

What do I mean by this? Here are four disparate examples:

1. Jewish Community Centers of North America’s Ethical Start: With much of the Jewish content of early childhood education revolving around the celebration of Jewish holidays, the JCCA developed a curriculum that uses the teachings of *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of our Fathers) to expose young children, their families, and teachers to how Judaism can inform the every day. Thus, lessons focus on how to look at what is inside a person or how to determine what is important in life (happiness, wisdom, etc.). The program has reached thousands of young children and their parents (numerous parent study groups have been convened as a result) and has changed the culture in many of the JCCs where it is based. With early childhood education a predictor of an individual’s subsequent participation in Jewish educational experiences,⁹ the long-term impact could be even greater.
2. Golden Apple Award: For years, University of Michigan Hillel has co-sponsored an award with Apple Computer, whereby students nominate an inspiring teacher who is then asked to give the lecture he or she would give if it were the last lecture of the professor’s life. Each year, hundreds of students send in nominations, attend the lecture, and are told that the Award is inspired by the teaching of a first century rabbinic sage, Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrkanu. Hillel Director Michael Brook’s sees the Award’s success as placing Jewish values in a universal setting for Jews and non-Jews and in co-branding Hillel with Apple, one of the most valued brands by young people around.
3. Guilt and Pleasure Magazine: A new literary magazine published by Reboot, G&P mixes fiction and non-fiction, graphic novels with photo essays, new material with the archival to engage Jews (twenties and beyond) in an examination of Jewish history, ritual, theology, culture and community. The magazine is not content light. Recent issues have included essays on grappling with the Bible, an article on the Jewish Vaudevillian scene of the early 1900’s (which begins with the Central Conference of American Rabbis 1909 convention); a reprint of Philip Roth’s 1961 speech at Loyola University sponsored by the ADL; and a photo essay of the casualties of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict. The magazine is also not sitting on the shelf. The last two issues sold out at Borders and Barnes and Noble.
4. American Jewish World Service and Teach for America: Wade Clark Roof, the Chair of Religious Studies at UC Santa Barbara gave a talk recently where he said that our society is in need of a “prosperity theology” – a religious response to the growing gap between rich and poor and I will add, the culture of excess. Ultimately, to speak to Jewish youth who are looking for authenticity and meaning, Judaism has to be saying something.

American Jewish World Service has been incredibly successful in reaching out to high school and college students, giving them an opportunity to experience Judaism's teachings about social justice first hand. An additional idea is to have the Foundation support the training and professional development of "x" number of young Jews who decide to become Teach for America Fellows. They would owe nothing in return, but would be supported by a Jewish Foundation because of its belief that education is critical and that an important form of Jewish expression is committing to effect change in under-resourced urban and rural public schools.

B. Any effective strategy must take into account the growing role of media in young people's lives.

Understanding the landscape means that the Foundation's giving must reflect changes in *where* young people go for information, community building, and a creative outlet and *how* they access and understand knowledge, community, and culture. This does not mean that more traditional, physical venues – schools, homes, camps, synagogues, etc. will cease to exist. (One can argue that the growing role of technology makes in person interactions even more important.) Rather, they must share space with My Space.

To make sense of these changes, we need to learn from those at the forefront of building and understanding this new media world – the creatives, the writers covering technology, the opinion leaders. And then we need to: (1) share what we are learning with those who are already working in Jewish life and (2) provide the support to help key institutions along with new efforts test a variety of strategies. The standard, though, must be the quality and attention to the aesthetic that exists in the broader community. Mediocre websites where content is top down and rarely changes will not do.

Along with new technology, we need to pay attention to, and support, media-based art and culture – music, film, radio, magazines etc. These forms of art and culture can be incredibly viral (easy to transmit) and deeply profound. (Look at the impact a small film called "Trembling Before G-d" had.) This area, however, often falls outside of foundation funding because of its inherent challenges -- it seems so dependent on personal taste, can be expensive, and is difficult to evaluate. To mitigate the risks and increase the potential for impact, there are a number of "intermediaries" that one can call on for expertise and possible partnerships. (See list in endnotes.)¹⁰

Finally, we need to help the important voices of our time penetrate the culture. The Righteous Persons Foundation recently funded a film on Abraham Joshua Heschel and I was struck by two scenes in the rough cut. The first featured Heschel on a Sunday morning news show talking about the Vietnam War and other issue of the day. The second had a group of priests reminiscing about how Heschel changed their understanding of prayer. Where are the Heschels of our day and how do we help their message make it into the public discourse? If you ask youth about the place of religion in current events these days, most would talk about it being a divisive force that leads to violence and hatred. They (and we) need to be reminded that the opposite can still be true.

I know that Auburn Theological Seminary in New York just launched a media training program for moderate and progressive religious leaders (including rabbis). While this efforts targets an older audience, if you have seen the demographics for The Daily Show, you know that young people are paying attention as well. Clearly there is much to be done on this front. At a minimum, however, grantees need to be asked about their communications strategies and provided with the support (financial and technical) to build their capacity in this area.

3. Don't lose sight of the importance of limited-term, intensive experiences

Most Jews will not engage in sustained intensive Jewish education. I say this as the product of day school education and now the parent of day school children. While there is work to be done to improve the quality of the education (provide better support and recruit educators, expand the number of day schools, and of course, lower the financial barriers), most Jews will not receive their Jewish education five days a week. Clearly, there is an argument to be made about supporting the "core," (of course we should) but I have never been one to write off the majority. (And what would Jewish life look like today without the contribution of that assimilated Jew, Theodore Herzl.)

So where then is the opportunity for education? Increasingly, in supporting efforts that provide young people (and people of all ages) with a limited-time, intensive experience. Some examples:

- Again, AJWS's spring break and summer trips abroad;
- Brandeis University's Genesis Summer Program – a month long program that brings high school students to the university's campus for a high level experience that mixes formal and informal education, Jewish studies, academics, the arts, humanities, and community service.
- Operation Understanding DC – a year long program where young Jews and African Americans (and African American Jews) learn about each other's heritage and history and then travel throughout the South and East Coast during the summer; and
- The ever important summer camp experiences along with invaluable trips to Israel.

Since many of these experiences, disproportionately attract young girls, we need to figure out ways to engage young boys as well. The growing gender divide is a well kept secret for most and could have a stark impact on the future of Jewish communal life.

II. INVESTING IN GOOD PEOPLE

What binds this list of disparate ideas are the people behind them. At the end of the day, effective, strategic philanthropy is at its core about investing in the right people. So how do you find them?

As Jonathan Sarna wrote in his essay "A Great Awakening," the "most creative ideas for revitalizing Jewish life often flow from the bottom up rather than the top down, and from outsiders, rather than insiders."¹¹ We need the input and ideas from those individuals who are on the margins of Jewish life, yet front and center in the universal world – opinion leaders, creative content providers, researchers, and others. That is part of the thinking behind Reboot, which brings young, disconnected creatives and activists together with some of the best rabbis and academics to openly explore their Jewish identity. The hope is that some will leave inspired to create ways for others to learn about, examine, and experience their Jewishness. More individuals, however, need to be brought to the table (as long as it is not pre-set) and there needs to be funding and mechanisms to support their ideas and efforts

Second, great ideas will not just come from those who are new. There are so many people already doing important work on the ground. They too need investment in their ideas as well as support to help sustain them on the long journey. I have had countless conversations, lately, with people who talk about the need for a sabbatical – time away from the demands of 24/7 work lives, to rest, breathe, and think differently. Often those who are the most innovative, are rewarded with more demands (with funders asking when they are going to expand, reach more individuals, bring their efforts to scale). Shabbat needs to be taken seriously and paid sabbaticals should not be overlooked.

For those who can not take off extended periods of time, they need the tools and space to recharge and get in touch with what brought them to the field in the first place. I have always been struck by the accounts of rabbis and educators who have attended an Institute for Jewish Spirituality retreat – how fraudulent they feel sitting on pulpits or in front of students talking about God or meaning, when their own lives are so devoid of meaning and time for contemplation. Young people want authenticity and are moved by those who “walk the talk.” We are a community with a lot of tired leaders.

CONCLUSION

To be strategic, one has to be focused. Yet as Shula Reinharz told me ten plus years ago -- we live in a “fractured community and so the response has to be somewhat fractured.” Especially in the beginning, I would give the Foundation some room to experiment. There is no silver bullet – no one right program or idea that will solve all the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. Narrow your focus, support some of the core issues in Jewish education, but make sure to keep a part of your funding open to good (new and old) ideas and to the people who make them happen. Jewish youth, Jewish life, and the world in general, are much in need of creative and compassionate funding.

¹ “Yahoo! and Carat Unveil Research Results Showing Teens are Truly ‘Born to be Wired,’” July 2003. Market research conducted by Harris Interactive and Teenage Research Unlimited (TRU). More the 2,500 teens ages 13-24 were polled using quantitative and qualitative methods.

² Pew Internet and American Life Project: “Teens and Technology: Youth are Leading the Transition to a Fully Wired and Mobile Nation” July 2005.

³ “Yahoo! and Carat Unveil Research...”

⁴ Chris Anderson, “People Power: Blogs, User Reviews, Photo-Sharing—The Peer Production Era has Arrived,” Wired Magazine, July 2006.

⁵ “BBYO: A Gateway for Jewish Teens” May 2005

⁶ Anna Greenberg, “OMG! How Generation Y is Redefining Faith in the iPod Era,” 2005.

⁷ Anna Greenberg, “Grand Soy Vanilla Latte with Cinnamon, No Foam – Jewish Identity and Community in a Time of Unlimited Choices,” 2006

⁸ ibid

⁹ Steve Cohen, “Engaging the Next Generation of American Jews: Distinguishing the In-married, Inter-married, and Non-married,” August 2005.

¹⁰ Cultural funding intermediaries include organizations like: Creative Capitol, which identifies artists and provide the with funding and training; the Creative Works Fund in San Francisco; the new Six Points Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Artists just funded by the Jewish Federation in New York; and the Fund for Jewish Documentary Filmmaking at the National Foundation for Jewish Culture. Add to this countless artists, writers, radio producers, website creators, who would willingly serve on a jury panel to review material.

¹¹ Jonathan Sarna, “A Great Awakening – The Transformation that Shaped Twentieth Century American Judaism and Its Implications for Today,” Council for Initiatives in Jewish Education, 1995.